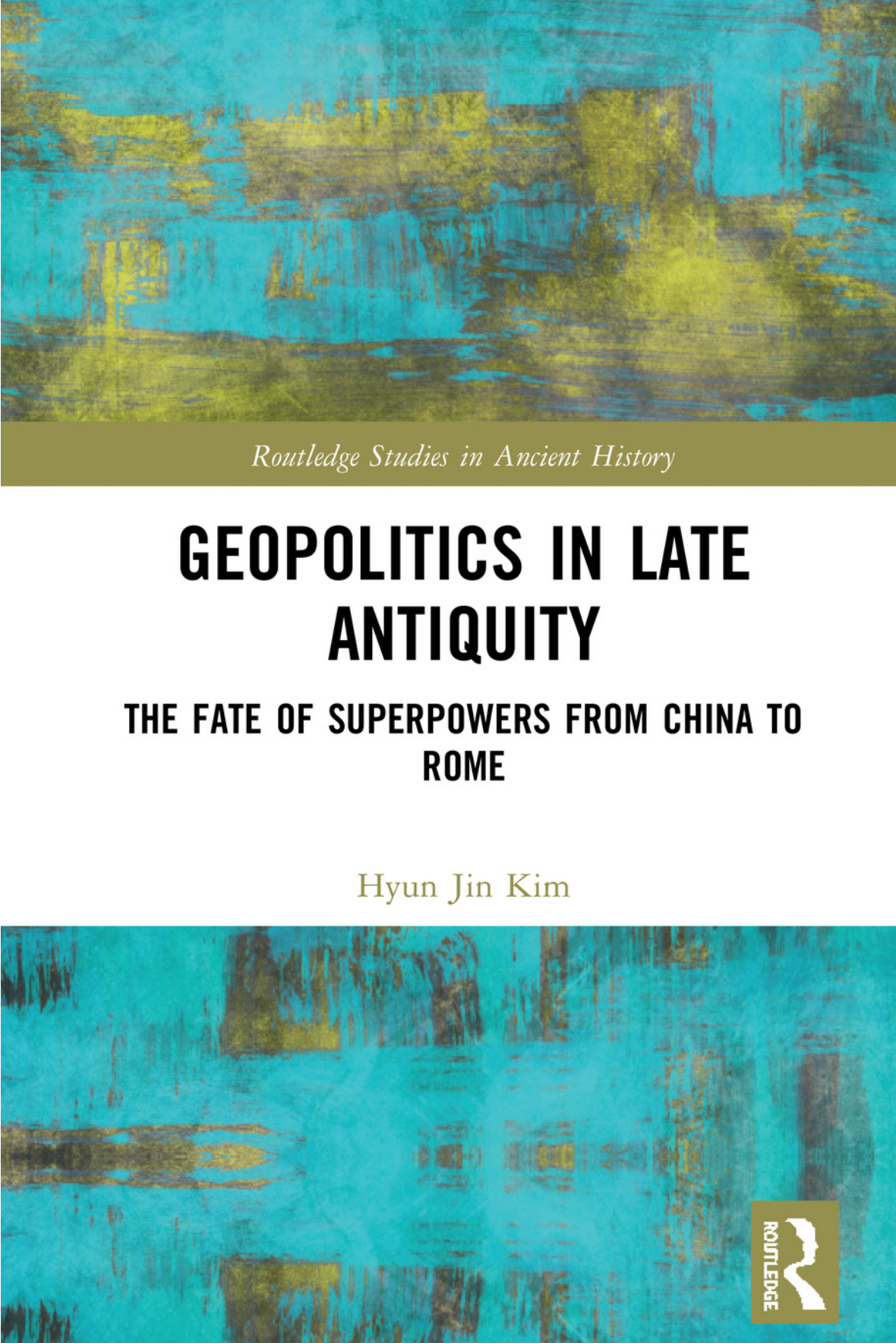




Routledge Studies in Ancient History

GEOPOLITICS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

**THE FATE OF SUPERPOWERS FROM CHINA TO
ROME**

Hyun Jin Kim



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Geopolitics in Late Antiquity

‘Hyun Jin Kim is a true global historian. Able to exploit Chinese and classical sources directly, he has transformed our understanding of steppe history in Late Antiquity. The challenge posed by the Huns (Xiongnu for the Chinese) to the established great powers was serious. After surveying the varied responses of the Han empire, the two halves of the Roman empire, and the Sassanian Persian empire, and their varied outcomes, he offers sound advice to contemporary policy-makers in China and the USA.’

– James Howard-Johnston, *Oxford University, UK*

Geopolitics in Late Antiquity explores the geopolitical revolution which shook the foundations of the ancient world, the dawning of the millennium of Inner Asian dominance and virtual monopoly of world power (with interludes) that began with the rise of the Huns and then continued under the hegemony of various other steppe peoples. Kim examines first the geopolitical situation created by the rise of Inner Asian powers, and then the reactions of the great empires of Eurasia to this geopolitical challenge.

A unique feature of this book is its in-depth analysis of the geostrategies (some successful, others misguided) adopted by China, Rome and Persia to cope with the growing Inner Asian threat. The conclusions and insights drawn from this analysis are then used to inform modern geopolitics, mainly the contest for hegemonic power between the United States and China.

Geopolitics in Late Antiquity is a crucial resource for both academic and learned general readership, who have an interest in the fate of antiquity’s super-powers and also for those engaged in current international relations policymaking, who wish to learn from historical precedents.

Hyun Jin Kim is Senior Lecturer in Classics at the University of Melbourne, Australia. He took his DPhil from the University of Oxford, UK, and is the author of multiple books on Greece-Rome and China comparative studies, the Huns and Inner Asia and the historical implications of China’s contemporary rise.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
1 Introduction	1
<i>1.1 The great geopolitical dilemma, theoretical approaches</i>	2
<i>1.2 Territorial disputes and retrenchment, the re-emergence of policymaking</i>	11
<i>1.3 Summary</i>	16
2 The geopolitical situation: the superpowers and the Huns	19
<i>2.1 Han China and the Huns</i>	19
<i>2.2 Rome and the Huns</i>	23
<i>2.3 Sassanian Persia and the Huns</i>	32
3 The superpower reaction	41
<i>3.1 China strikes back</i>	41
<i>3.2 Rome falters</i>	43
<i>3.3 Persian collapse</i>	66
4 Conclusion: the geostrategic choices for the future	85
<i>4.1 China as the geopolitical equivalent of the great Turco-Mongol Empires of Eurasia</i>	85
<i>4.2 The geostrategic options for the US</i>	101
<i>Select bibliography</i>	109
<i>Index</i>	126

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1 Introduction

In the past few decades it has been fashionable to speak of global hegemonic power shifts. The assumption has been that global power and hegemony were gradually shifting from the United States to East Asia, more specifically to China. Nothing generates more anxiety and fear in both the academic community and also among the general public than the prospect of another hegemonic conflict between the world's great powers. China's breathtaking rise in recent years has drawn the attention of the world to its 'potential' to upset the geopolitical status quo, to 'overthrow' or 'replace' the century-long dominance of the US in global affairs. Throughout history, it is often argued, power transition of this sort involving the transfer of hegemony or a tectonic shift in the geopolitical landscape, has usually involved apocalyptic warfare and mayhem such as the two World Wars of the previous century. More than a decade ago policy analysts, international relations experts and political theorists had already begun to sound the alarm and warned of an impending disaster on the horizons, that is if China is not contained and US hegemony protected.¹

Those alarmist voices have neither diminished nor been silenced as this book goes to press and what is not disputed in this heated debate is that the world faces a new geopolitical reality. The geopolitical landscape of the Pacific Rim has indeed experienced and witnessed a transformation. China is now significantly stronger than it was 30 years earlier (although there certainly can be disagreements on whether that accumulation of strength on the part of China is enough to challenge the hegemony of the US) and the top foreign policy dilemma of every nation state in East Asia and indeed across the globe is what to do in this changed geopolitical environment. This book seeks to illuminate our very modern geopolitical concerns by looking back to and examining in greater detail a significant geopolitical revolution in Late Antiquity which forced the contemporary superpowers of the known world (Rome, Iran and China) to react to a dangerous new geopolitical reality: the precipitous rise of steppe empires in Inner Asia that threatened the established world order and presented an existential crisis to these traditional, regional hegemons.

By observing how these great ancient powers managed or rather often mismanaged a major geopolitical revolution on their doorsteps and struggled with their

2 Introduction

rapidly evolving geostrategic² options in Late Antiquity (in the case of China earlier during the Han dynasty), this book hopes to inform the current geostrategic decision making of world powers. It also has the aim of escaping the Eurocentric models that have dominated policy debates and international relations theory by focusing more closely on wider Eurasian geopolitical developments in world history that arguably have a greater geographic relevance to the current geopolitical situation in Asia (especially for China) and the Asia-Pacific (via analogy for the US). The expansion of the Huns/Xiongnu was a very Eurasian geopolitical development that impacted the whole of the Afro-Eurasian interactive system.³ The analysis of how the three superpowers of Antiquity (Rome, Iran and China) coped with this unexpected challenge (and dealt with each other in the case of Rome and Sassanian Persia) will form the core of the discussion of this book. This and shorter analyses of historical exempla from later periods of history (dealing with the geostrategic decisions of the Mongol Yuan, Ming and Ottoman Empires) will inform tentative geostrategic recommendations for both the US and China.

Although it is the bread and butter of world leaders and policymakers engaged in diplomacy and military planning, geopolitics is rarely recognised as a legitimate academic discipline. It is often referred to as a pseudoscience, much discredited due to its association with the likes of General Karl Haushofer and his expansionist ideas that arguably influenced Hitler and the Nazis during the Third Reich. This is most unfortunate for two obvious reasons: a) Haushofer can hardly be credited with having ‘invented’ geopolitics; b) both he and Hitler were such poor practitioners of the art. Geopolitics is in essence a study of historical and geographical phenomena/situations which inform foreign policy decisions, a practical tool rather than a regular academic discipline. Its key attributes were widely understood and studied long before Haushofer so famously ‘abused’ it. Its first European academic practitioner was arguably Halford Mackinder, a British academic, who speculated on what he labelled the ‘world island’: Eurasia.⁴ Of course, I would argue that what later was termed geopolitics was always of interest to policy planners from antiquity to modernity. Who could possibly deny that Sunzi’s *The Art of War* is in essence a treatise on geopolitics and geostrategy? The whole question of whether geopolitics is applicable to historical periods other than what is termed the modern world is superbly answered by Grygiel (cited above in note 2) and there is no need to repeat his explanations here.

1.1 The great geopolitical dilemma, theoretical approaches

It is, however, first necessary to situate this approach within the context of current debates in international relations studies and political science concerning two key areas: firstly, the phenomenon of hegemonic power transition and secondly, the revival of geopolitical and geostrategic thinking in policy decision-making processes. Before discussing historical exempla I will here briefly discuss whether on a theoretical level existing hegemonic powers can accommodate a rising power and/or manage a power transfer (if it were to become a reality) without engaging in a major conflict and suffering a disastrous diminution of their national power.

The following section is not meant to be an exhaustive summary/analysis of all the literature concerning the topics mentioned above. Only select literature that is most relevant and/or is of particular interest to the argument being made has been cited to facilitate an easy read for the general readership. The same approach has been adopted for the rest of the volume. More in-depth discussion of the secondary literature for the learned academic readership will at times be provided and in other circumstances notices will be given to direct them to related publications by either the author or other experts.

What is hegemony?

It is first necessary to define clearly what we mean by 'hegemony'. The term 'hegemony' has been used by historians and political scientists alike to describe structural conditions in the international system whereby 'a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system'.⁵ The three powers we have mentioned, Rome, Sassanian Iran and Han China all fit that description to varying degrees and can be categorised as hegemonic powers within their respective spheres of influence. The great Mearsheimer of the realist school of thought has suggested rather bluntly and also perceptively that hegemony refers in practice to a self-serving 'domination of the system'⁶ by the hegemonic power. Other scholars argue that hegemony as a concept implies rather a fusion of varying degrees of coercion and also at times consent.⁷ Hegemony, thus, can be either purely predatory or more cooperative and at times even benign, depending on the theoretical lenses applied. However, there is little doubt that hegemony implies a clear and undisputed power differential in the system.

Great power alone, however, does not necessarily denote hegemony. By way of example economic power does not mean much if not accompanied by a corresponding degree of influence (whether by force or consent) in the system. In the case of hegemons, this influence takes the form of the ability (and willingness) to administer unit interaction in the international system. Modelski thus defines 'world powers' as those states that have the capacity to maintain order in the global system.⁸ Expanding on Modelski's notion of order maintenance, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye define hegemony as a structural form of the international system where 'one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so'.⁹ Thus, a more encompassing definition is provided by scholars such as Goldstein who define hegemony as the ability to 'dictate, or at least dominate, the rules and arrangements by which international relations, political and economic, are conducted'.¹⁰

Such definitions, however, if taken at face value, are likely to offend every major power involved in the international system other than the hegemon. Thus, there have been attempts to legitimise hegemonic domination by articulating the notion that hegemony is more of a responsibility or a privilege than arbitrary domination. In other words, a fine balance exists between consent and coercion in hegemony, rendering it for the most part a satisfactory arrangement for lesser units in the system. Kindleberger for instance has argued that:

4 *Introduction*

the international economic and monetary system needs leadership, a country which is prepared, consciously or unconsciously, under some system of rules that it has internalized, to set standards of conduct for other countries; and to seek to get others to follow them, to take on an undue share of the burdens of the system.¹¹

This also means that for a hegemony to be viable there needs to be and often is to a degree of 'benevolence' on the part of the hegemon and some level of voluntary cooperation by other units in the system that benefit from the maintenance of that system.¹²

Such an understanding and a positive view of America's 'liberal hegemony' can be found in works by scholars such as John Ikenberry and Charles Kupchan who portray other units in the hegemonic system as partners rather than subordinates.¹³ A liberal hegemony, they argue, is characterised by 'the durability of political institutions, particularly the constitutional institutions that define the basic rules of the polity, which provides sources of stability'.¹⁴ Wallerstein's 'World Systems Theory', similarly, regards hegemony (i.e. US hegemony) as more than mere leadership, defining the hegemon as 'primus inter pares'.¹⁵ Thus, liberal scholars, although they do not cast doubt on the degree of influence exercised by hegemons (its coercive potential), tend to see the current US hegemonic system as a highly interactive one with constraints and opportunities for both great and smaller powers. In other words, they see it as an acceptable arrangement for all involved that deserves to be maintained. It is this 'liberal' rather than the hard 'realist' definition of hegemony that is usually held up as justification for the maintenance of US supremacy by advocates of US hegemony. Similar, though obviously not identical, justifications for Roman, Iranian and Han Chinese supremacy and hegemony can be found in the historical literature of all three empires, coercion and unabashed domination/exploitation going hand in hand with the pleasant fiction (or reality) of the benign suzerainty and munificence of the hegemon. What is interesting is what happens when a challenger (in our case the Huns) emerges and refuses to adhere to this system.

Power transition

Irrespective of what definition one prefers for hegemony, there seems to be little disagreement in scholarship that the rise and fall of hegemons entail a substantial systemic risk and can heighten the chance of conflict. The dynamics of those periods of 'succession' in the upper echelon of the international system are encapsulated theoretically by the 'power transition' literature. The core tenets of the theory are of realist origins in that it posits a hierarchical international system where a dominant unit exerts decisive influence on all other units. Regional hierarchies exist as well, though regional powers are ultimately subordinate to the dominant power in the system. Moreover, a state's position in the system is determined by its relative power which is defined as 'the ability to impose on or persuade an opponent to comply with demands'.¹⁶ Power transitions are often

associated with instability and the outbreak of war as the challenger approaches parity with the dominant state and is willing to use force in order to reshape the system's rules and institutions.¹⁷ These arrangements may include control (or influence) over territory, access to natural resources and so on.

In this power transition theory there is a noticeable departure from neorealism and neorealist tenets of measuring power. Power is calculated by power transition theorists as a factor of 'the number of people who can work and fight, their economic productivity, and the effectiveness of the political system in extracting and pooling individual contributions to advance national goals'.¹⁸ Thus, in contrast to structural realist thought, power is also determined by domestic processes to the extent that they impact on the country's relative international standing. However, domestic political processes are highly volatile and mainly affect power differentials in the short term.¹⁹ Considering, in addition, that population growth is a slow process and only confers a gradual effect on national capabilities, power transition places an emphasis on economic growth and technological progress as the most dynamic elements which can alter power distributions in the long term and which resultantly bring about escalation and conflict. For adequately populous countries, technological revolution accompanied by political change should allow developing countries to converge with developed nations as they will grow more rapidly (even though developed countries are able to maintain steady growth rates), assuming they avoid 'poverty traps' related to their limited political capacity. This is a crucial element of power transition theory, as it suggests an unavoidable rise and fall of powers. It is argued that differential growth rates can precipitate the decline of hegemons in the long term as well as the rise of new challengers.²⁰

It is also claimed that absolute measures of power are of secondary concern in this situation. What really matters for international politics at the critical juncture of power transition is the relative power of contenders. When a major power has greater capabilities at its disposal vis-à-vis its competitors, there will be a corresponding increase in the urge for that power to expand. Realist scholars who view power parity as unstable, see the possibility of war arise due to the existence of a double incentive: one for the declining power to act preventively and 'decapitate' the challenger while it still possesses the edge;²¹ as well as a corresponding incentive felt by the challenger to complete its ascendancy by enforcing 'change'. As Wayman puts it, relative power shifts create 'appetite in the gaining state and apprehension in the declining state'.²² Moreover, swift changes in the distribution of power may cause misperceptions on both sides. The rising power may overestimate its reach, whereas the dominant power may underestimate its decline. This creates a situation where both contenders believe in their capacity to achieve a decisive victory. However, for most power transition theorists, it is the challenger who initiates conflict. The reason lies in the way the international system is constructed, where the dominant power enjoys disproportionate benefits in economic and security terms. Upsetting these arrangements through an act of aggression could jeopardise this status quo, which is something a hegemon would view as highly counterproductive.²³

Thus, on a theoretical level power transition theory postulates a somewhat gloomy picture of the future when it comes to global stability. Nevertheless, the concept of satisfaction is crucial to power transition theorists for its impact on the probability of war. As suggested, conflict arises when a rising power begins to view current arrangements as misaligned with reality and views the system as increasingly skewed, unfair and biased.²⁴ The underlying logic in power transition theory is that a hegemon who profits from the older order will resist its restructuring to the benefit of an emerging power. Indeed, scholars widely view this 'status quo change' with apprehension: 'Throughout the history of the modern international states system, ascending powers have always challenged the position of the dominant (hegemonic) power in the international system—and these challenges have usually culminated in war'.²⁵ With regards to the contemporary debate surrounding the rise of China, scholars such as John Mearsheimer share a pessimistic view of the country's (re)emergence.²⁶

In general, those international relations theory strands that do get involved with foreign policymaking, most notably defensive and offensive realism, take a rather apprehensive view towards unit interaction in the system. According to the most prominent offensive realist for example, again John Mearsheimer, intentions are 'impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty'²⁷ and their volatility means that those states that seek to ensure their survival should assume the worst case scenario. 'Indeed, the best guarantee of survival is to be a hegemon, because no other state can seriously threaten such a mighty power'.²⁸ Even when units are security (as opposed to power) seekers, misperception is pervasive in international politics; behaviours that may be viewed as genuinely defensive internally in states may be perceived as highly threatening by other actors due to erroneous perceptions as Robert Jervis has artfully shown.²⁹ Security dilemmas arise even when all actors simply try to attain security, leading to escalation and conflict.

Has the advent of nuclear weapons changed this precarious equation? Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in general may have made miscalculation more costly, but as Organski pointed out 'fear of nuclear weapons ought to deter the rulers of nations from taking the chances they do, but in fact it does not'.³⁰ For realists and power transition theorists alike, nuclear weapons represent little more than 'extra insurance against unlikely calamity'.³¹ There is little empirical evidence that escalation and war are less probable due to any costs associated with conflict. Despite the undisputed fact that waging war is becoming more costly in terms of material and loss of human life, power transition theorists suggest that nations are capable of recovering swiftly from war and soon return to long-term growth rates.³²

According to Jack Levy we are still methodologically blind when trying to predict international conflict: 'Our understanding of war remains at an elementary level. No widely accepted theory of the causes of war exists and little agreement has emerged on the methodology through which these causes might be discovered'.³³ Thus, while power dynamics may create possibilities, theorists never assume that these are realised in a linear manner.

Theoretically, there is also nothing that precludes a peaceful power transition. When a challenger views the status quo as largely satisfactory, as China has until

recently, conflict can be avoided.³⁴ As Organski puts it, ‘the kind of relationship between the dominant nation and the lesser members of its international order varies from one order to another . . .’³⁵ and need not always lead to the same antagonistic outcome. This ‘freedom of action’ is the result of the conceptual origins of power transition theory, as it places emphasis on the status quo as an organising force in the international system, as opposed to anarchy being the predominant organising principle of the system in neorealism. By according greater emphasis on state motivations, the theory leaves the door open for diverse outcomes, including cooperative ones. This theoretical divergence implies that power transitions are historical ‘flashlights’: they alert to an impending change and heighten the danger of large scale conflict, but nothing guarantees that the new era cannot come about in a peaceful manner, even if structural conditions are highly conflict-prone. After all, if every hegemonic transition resulted in conflict, ‘Britain and the United States would have gone to war at the beginning of this century (twentieth), when the Americans surpassed the British in economic and naval power in the Western Hemisphere’.³⁶

Hegemony and power transition theories

Power transition and hegemony appear to constitute highly contradictory concepts. Indeed, in a properly operating hegemonic system there is no visible challenger, pointing to a stable status quo. On the contrary, power transitions are synonymous with a tense dynamic which translates to conditions of parity or near parity. Therefore, without oversimplifying the relationship, it is quite accurate to suggest that the beginning of power transition marks the end of the hegemony and vice versa. Nevertheless, the two theories share a number of common tenets. Specifically, both emphasise unipolar stability: power transition theory echoes Gilpin’s hegemonic stability formulation when it suggests that relative power determines the structure of a hierarchical system in which ‘a single powerful state controls or dominates the lesser states in the system’.³⁷ Thus, even though hegemonic theories may suggest more or less benign hegemons or distributive outcomes, the very particular structural realist roots of both theories seem hard to avoid. Interestingly, both power transition and hegemony also posit a hierarchical system which is enriched with interactions going beyond simple power considerations. By focusing on the behaviour of the great power (hegemony) or the challenger (power transition), the two theories provide a window of opportunity in times of systemic instability so that the system adjusts to the new conditions without necessarily escalating to war. In other words, both theories allow for the ‘art’ of foreign policymaking to re-enter calculations, thereby reflecting a world closer to Morgenthau’s narrative.

Moreover, the dynamics of great power rise and fall in hegemonic theories seem to be compatible with power transition narratives. Hegemonic stability’s prevailing narrative is simple and compelling. The theory argues that the dominant power in the system ensures stability through its military and economic primacy. This is in turn achieved through the universal enforcement of rules

8 *Introduction*

towards the provision of public goods in the system. However, the fact that the hegemon is obliged to exert a strenuous effort to enforce stability by stationing troops abroad, providing financial resources etc. implies that the hegemon's edge gradually erodes, thereby leading to a succession (power transition kicks in) when a rising power decides to challenge the status quo. Alarming, the main method of systemic change throughout history, at least according to this theory, has been hegemonic war.³⁸

In other words, power transition could constitute a necessary but apparently not sufficient condition for hegemonic wars. In order to explore the conditions under which a hegemon could accommodate a rising power, it may be useful to revisit the crucial concept of 'dissatisfaction' in power transition theory and try to deconstruct it. It is important however to emphasise that power transition theory treats the issue of what satisfaction really entails for both the existing dominant power and the rising challenger in a rather superficial manner. Thus, although power transitions may escalate to war when a rising power becomes dissatisfied with the existing distributive outcomes, the specific cost-benefit calculus that might lead to conflict remains underspecified.

Towards synthesis

Dissatisfaction in power transition theory is a useful departure point, but hegemonic theories are more useful analytically if we are to investigate the content of the concept. This is because hegemonic theories posit more complex interactions in the system: The nature of an international system is defined by the institutions and norms 'imposed' by the dominant power. Together, institutions and norms set the terms for the manners in which units interact with each other. After the end of the Second World War for instance, the Bretton Woods institutions and norms such as free trade and non-interference in a country's domestic affairs delineated the nature and limits of the contemporary international system. Reflecting a particular power distribution, these arrangements may render, according to Stephen Krasner, the dominant state as the primary beneficiary and may continue to provide a disproportionate amount of spoils long after the power distribution in the system has been altered.³⁹

Maintaining this 'liberal international order' (or at least order with liberal elements) requires supposedly the presence of a 'benevolent despot', who has the capacity (and willingness) to provide a number of public goods (including a stable monetary regime).⁴⁰ In this regard the free-trade regimes of the 19th and 20th centuries are associated with the leadership provided by the dominant powers of the system, Great Britain and the United States respectively. As argued earlier, this 'liberal' facade as justification for US hegemony may to a certain extent provide that order with a degree of legitimacy, stability and predictability, which may in turn by affecting the cost benefit equation of all aspiring challengers, deter an outright challenge to the system, at least for now. During a period of relative 'decline', these liberal arguments could prove to be of utmost importance for the preservation of the current system as it stands. The question is, for how long will

enough persuasive power be generated and bind enough key powerful states to the status quo for this to be an effective deterrence to an aggressive challenge?

Susan Strange has argued that in the 1970s these conditions ensured that the US was not deprived of its ability to set the agenda and shape the structure of the international system to its benefit even during a period of relative decline.⁴¹ While Strange emphasised (in retrospect quite successfully) the role of the US dollar as a reserve currency, the same logic can be applied to all international issue areas, from security to economics and trade. It is proposed that this liberal hegemonic order due to its flexibility and legitimacy may actually possess the capacity to accommodate rising powers.⁴² Even though hegemonic theories may seem reluctant to accept that hegemons could consider large-scale concessions when their primacy is questioned, scholars such as Duncan Snidal have demonstrated that highly cooperative outcomes are actually possible even during a declining hegemony.⁴³

In the 21st century, the aforementioned argument can only become more important: Joseph Nye notes that power transitions may lead to escalation and conflict for the reasons realists would suggest, but the manner in which power is operationalised plays an important role in decisions of war and peace, as 'Rising powers have fewer incentives for territorial aggression than they have had throughout most of history because the route to prestige, power and economic success in the modern era lies in high technology production and human capital'.⁴⁴ Nye exemplifies his view when he asserts for example that 'efforts by the democratic great powers to engage China and Russia in the international community and to urge them to make their intentions and military forces transparent are the best means of limiting the potential for conflicts'.⁴⁵ It is argued that 'satisfaction' may be more achievable now by rising powers than ever before in the history of international politics.

However, the narrative of the potential for a peaceful power transition implies at least a basic acceptance of the existing arrangements by the rising challenger. Indeed, if the challenger despises the international order in its entirety or becomes gradually disillusioned with the benefits of maintaining the status quo without significant modifications, as arguably China is becoming in recent years, it would be difficult to suggest that there will be more room for accommodation. For example, the USSR and its allies during the Cold War constituted a fundamentally contrasting paradigmatic arrangement which precluded any form of functional integration of opposing members. In other words, accommodation may be extremely difficult to achieve when the rising challenger and its allies represent a different set of political, territorial, diplomatic and economic arrangements. In the case of the USSR, the potential challenger had created from the onset of the superpower rivalry a network of allies and satellite states (COMECON) which defied almost all of the 'Western' arrangements.

Power transition theorists argue that mutual satisfaction is easier to achieve if both contenders are democratic states. Thus, despite the fact that the US overtook the UK in the end of the 19th century, a war did not break out as the level of satisfaction of both powers allowed them to adapt to the new distribution of power in

the system.⁴⁶ In this context, power transition, despite its realist origins, may present the opportunity to accommodate change in a liberal hegemonic order where power still constrains and dictates behaviour to a substantial extent. According to Ikenberry, 'democracies are better able to create binding institutions and establish credible restraints and commitments than nondemocracies'.⁴⁷

The origins of this line of thinking deserve more scrutiny. According to liberal stipulations conflicts 'are determined not only by the balance of power, but by the domestic structure of states, their values, identities and cultures and international institutions for conflict resolution'.⁴⁸ There has been an abundance of research on what scholars call the phenomenon of 'democratic peace', exploring the idea that democracies are either less conflict prone or do not fight each other. Democratic leaders may also be more willing to cooperate and commit to international agreements.⁴⁹ However, one can find accounts to the contrary: Leaders may seek domestic political gains by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy.⁵⁰ Alarmingly, scholars seem to converge to the view that democratising (in transition) states and even limited democracies (semi-authoritarian states) are generally more conflict prone than democracies and authoritarian states alike.⁵¹

Delving into the state's 'black box' may not necessarily be analytically useful. This is because the distinction between a liberal democracy and authoritarian structures is becoming a challenging matter in the context of globalisation, where state actors try to achieve a nuanced balance between controlling flows of resources and integrating successfully in an increasingly globalised world. After all, Ikenberry's own formulations regarding the integration of a rising power seem to indicate that a variety of polities can fit into the paradigm. Thus, to the extent that they affect international outcomes domestic characteristics are important. However, the analytical focus should probably centre actor preferences regarding international or global arrangements, as this is the locus of the 'battle' for influence between the hegemon and rising competitors. Establishing institutional links with units (a process defined as 'binding'), in order to curtail the hegemon's autonomy and provide 'voice opportunities' in decision making⁵² does not require the existence of a liberal democracy, though Ikenberry's concept of 'bonding' (rendering hegemony transparent and predictable)⁵³ does not appear to be as compatible with an autocratic hegemon.

The pre-eminence of the international sphere in this debate has clear implications for the contemporary debate surrounding China's potential to rise peacefully. In the case of China, the rising challenger's capacity to integrate in world affairs by endorsing existing institutional and normative frameworks has been surprisingly substantial. Despite the fact that China is an authoritarian state, it has shown a rather surprising aptitude for integration in the international system. From trade negotiations to WMD treaties and climate change, Chinese dissatisfaction has not thus far hampered Beijing from effectively participating in all relevant organisations and fora, advancing its positions and acquiring gains and international credibility in the process. The implications of this phenomenon have to be scrutinised in order to assess the trajectory of the 21st century's power transition in world affairs.

1.2 Territorial disputes and retrenchment, the re-emergence of policymaking

Thus far, we have treated power transitions as instances of negotiations comprising mainly institutional and economic or influence related arrangements that can be the object of re-allocation during a power transition. Two vexing matters, one related to the other, however, present a serious problem that could potentially cause the ‘dissatisfaction’ of China (arguably they already have) to escalate beyond the boundaries set for meaningful accommodation. They are territorial claims and national pride. Historically territorial disputes have been the most frequent cause of war, surpassing any other dividing issue.⁵⁴ Moreover, past rising powers such as the United States, Japan and Germany have also all pursued territorial gains during their ascension. Power transition scholars emphasise territorial disputes as a major component of dissatisfaction regarding the status quo.⁵⁵ Research on the links between territory and conflict has a long history in international relations. While an offensive realist such as John Mearsheimer would suggest that states fight because acquiring more power is their ultimate goal, the trigger to wars rarely lies in the underlying structural conditions, but can be located around the issue over which two contenders disagree.⁵⁶ Territorial issues seem statistically and historically to constitute the most common cause of war.⁵⁷ Hensel asserts that ‘territory is often seen as highly salient for three reasons: its tangible contents or attributes, its intangible or psychological value, and its effects on a state’s reputation’.⁵⁸

In contrast, it has also been argued that in an era of globalisation territorial disputes no longer matter as much as they did before. Rosecrance for instance has described a shift from the old traditional ‘strategic state’ to the ‘trading state’ even before the end of the Cold War and the subsequent declining relevance of territory as a component of national power.⁵⁹ Scholars have emphasised the rise of not a necessarily democratic but a ‘capitalist peace’ where knowledge and technology are the main drivers of nations’ wealth (and thus power).⁶⁰ Some scholars have gone as far as suggesting that the traditional state with its heavy emphasis on control over territory is a thing of the past. Indeed, globalisation has cast doubt on the manner in which territory should continue to define our understanding of the concept of sovereignty.⁶¹ Notions of political ‘deterritorialisation’ are considered as signalling a new era in which borders are of reduced significance in world affairs.

It is always useful to remember though that territorial disputes persist to this day and certainly in East Asia Hensel’s assertions ring more true than the abstract theoretical articulation of a capitalist peace. China in particular has been vehement in pursuing what it perceives as its sovereign territorial rights, the recognition of which by neighbouring countries and the international community is seen as a litmus test for fathoming China’s standing in the world. In other words, territorial disputes in East Asia have been linked by China with its newly enhanced national prestige and pride. In this regard, geopolitics are as important as ever for the calculations of states despite the emergence of financial capitalism and the prevalence of international institutions, which we have discussed earlier. Even in

12 Introduction

cases where historical claims appear persuasive and legitimate, the situation on the ground seems to remain a decisive factor for the final resolution of territorial disputes. And this in the final analysis prevents the prospect of armed conflict from becoming obsolete. Despite the advent of international institutions and the growing importance of international law, resolution of territorial conflicts is in most cases decided by the realities on the ground, thereby confirming the validity of the *uti posseditis* principle.

So why is territorial expansion relevant for rising powers? Consider the following:

- 1) Control over natural resources: The theory of lateral pressure explains in a systematic manner the reasons rising powers choose to expand their influence abroad. Developed by Choucri and North, this paradigm posits that technological change and population growth are forces that generally increase the need for access to the necessary resources so that the national economy can maintain its momentum.⁶² Exhausting domestic resources over time may provide an incentive to capture territories which can provide these resources, especially if the state leadership comes to the conclusion that acquiring these resources through trade does not offer the required degree of supply security.⁶³ Naturally, a rising power with a large population and resource scarcity will face substantial lateral pressure.
- 2) Creation of a buffer zone: Expansion may make sense from a strategic point of view. Often, rising powers find themselves in vulnerable positions as their newly acquired economic/military prowess does not correspond to the limitations geography and borders pose. Moreover, the swift rise of a great power causes a balance of power shift in the region and provokes the establishment of opposing alliances. If a similar response (bandwagoning) cannot be achieved in the region, a rising power may try to seize territory militarily in order to provide the necessary 'strategic depth' for the promotion of its own security and future expansion of its influence. Alternatively, a military attack can be used to install a friendly regime in the region, thereby foregoing the need to make a long-term military commitment.
- 3) Nationalism and territory: These factors have long been intertwined. The incentive can be either to integrate co-ethnics who are outside the borders of the 'motherland'⁶⁴ or to satisfy a wider psychological need of the domestic population. Van Evera has rightly pointed out that amending a past perceived 'injustice' or a national trauma may mobilise a state to pursue war of expansion.⁶⁵ An existing rivalry or a history of territorial loss and/or humiliation can exacerbate an existing or 'dormant' nationalist pressure to expand through military means.

There are however some mitigating factors:

- 1) Participating in the existing economic order implies a degree of interdependence among states which in turn augments the opportunity costs of waging a

war. According to the literature on economic interdependence, a substantial integration in the global economic order of a state renders the cost of war prohibitive as the loss of trade partners and the sudden exclusion from beneficial regimes and arrangements in the economic sphere exerts a restraining effect on aggressive state behaviour.⁶⁶

- 2) The cost of maintaining control over acquired territory appears to be a prohibitive factor, considering recent historical examples. Assuming that expansion occurs in order to exploit the resources or reap the security benefits of the seized area, a long-term maintenance cost could render the whole endeavour financially untenable, although writers such as Liberman suggest that conquering industrialised areas may make sense in strict economic terms.⁶⁷
- 3) Political and diplomatic cost: Not only will the rising power be labelled an aggressor from its early years of ascendance, but also it will risk a counterbalancing effect which is not based on the distribution of power per se, but on the perceived threat. According to Stephen Walt, alliances are formed not based on the distribution of power alone, but depend on a composite indicator which takes into account aggressive intentions.⁶⁸

Where exactly then does policymaking fit in?

In our analysis thus far, the hegemon appears to be the protagonist of a Greek tragedy in that it has little, if any, control over the course of events. A common theme arising from the historical rise and fall of great powers seems to be an escalating series of military interventions which not only deplete domestic resources, but also accelerate the relative decline of great powers as they bring about the establishment of opposing alliances and coalitions. Military forays are also highly indicative of great power decline as they represent a failure of persuasion and consent in favour of a shift towards imposing one's will through the application of brute force.⁶⁹ US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan represent for some analysts strategic blunders typical of a declining hegemon trying to retain its faltering dominance.⁷⁰ The question here is whether these shortcomings in policymaking can be averted. Theoretically, there is no reason why this cannot be the case. In other words, if leadership decisions at times trump economic imperatives, as they certainly did in the two great World Wars of the 20th century, the rise and fall of great powers ceases to be a historical necessity.

Breaking the cycle through retrenchment?

If policy decisions based on geostrategy and geopolitical considerations can impact on the outcome of imperial fortunes, then what are some of the options available when a hegemon is faced with a 'challenger'? The first obvious option which we will discover in the historical exempla from Late Antiquity is retrenchment. If one were to assume that imperial overstretch for instance is part of the problem facing a traditionally dominant, but severely challenged, hegemonic power, then could retrenchment be the solution? A number of influential (mainly

realist but also of liberal origins) scholars warn about the implication of scaling back American commitments throughout the world. The underlying logic has little to do with the 'facts on the ground' but is more related to the signalling effects retrenchment would produce.⁷¹ According to Gilpin, retrenchment is an indication of relative weakness to allies and enemies alike with grave repercussions, as allies will shift loyalties and foes will rush to exploit any weakness. This is why Gilpin believes retrenchment is 'seldom pursued by a declining power' which had better follow alternative methods of managing its relative decline, such as mobilising additional resources internally or eliminating potential challengers through preventive war externally.⁷²

According to Robert Kaplan, 'Lessening our engagement with the world would have devastating consequences for humanity. The disruptions we witness today are but a taste of what is to come should our country flinch from its international responsibilities'.⁷³ Robert Kagan similarly asserts that even

A reduction in defense spending . . . would unnerve American allies and undercut efforts to gain greater cooperation. There is already a sense around the world, fed by irresponsible pundits here at home, that the United States is in terminal decline. Many fear that the economic crisis will cause the United States to pull back from overseas commitments. The announcement of a defense cutback would be taken by the world as evidence that the American retreat has begun.⁷⁴

So the argument goes and with good reasons. However, there may be an underlying weakness in the argument that concessions alone can compromise an actor's credibility. What is equally important is the actual capacity to defend these commitments. Therefore, a declining hegemon may be in a much better position to project credibility if it refocuses its remaining resources towards protecting core interests. Indeed, scholarly research indicates that the link between concessions and reputation in international politics is not as clear as pessimists posit.⁷⁵ Moreover, actors make commitments of varying significance and longevity. It is thus rational to assume that potential allies and enemies can discern the different value attributed to respective commitments. Concessions in one geographical area, consequently, may not affect commitments in another, more important, area.⁷⁶ On the contrary, they may even signal the great power's focus on its core interests, thereby bolstering its reputation. After all, neorealist tenets would compel leaders to expand and contract the states' reach in response to the change of structural conditions. Failing to do so would have adverse repercussions and accelerate their demise.⁷⁷ States are (or should be) weary of the 'Lippmann gap' – the situation where aspirations are too ambitious for available means, as overextension renders states vulnerable to predation.⁷⁸ There seems to be no incompatibility, therefore, between serving the 'national interest' and reducing the scope and magnitude of international involvement.

Indeed, Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent conducted an empirical study consisting of 18 different case studies to conclude that 'powers retrenched in

no less than eleven and no more than fifteen of the eighteen cases, a range of 61–83 percent'.⁷⁹ Great powers that were in decline engaged in interstate war in only four of the above-mentioned 18 cases and only the UK in 1935, which MacDonald and Parent argue was then in decline, went to war with the power that had just superseded it. What is interesting to note is that in six of 15 cases the declining great power, which chose to retrench, eventually managed to recover its ordinal rank from the state that surpassed it.⁸⁰ None of the powers that chose not to retrench, however, recovered their former ordinal rank.⁸¹ Thus, states can react to straightened circumstances in a similar way to how they would deal with geopolitically favourable situations: they can seek to adapt their geostrategy and international relations policies in ways that maximise their security within the restraints imposed by available resources and manpower.⁸²

So will this then work for the United States vis-à-vis China? This volume will henceforth argue that with regard to China and East Asia, the US approach should be the opposite of retrenchment for geopolitical reasons outlined in the analogies and comparative analyses offered in subsequent chapters, but that retrenchment in other regions of the world, in order to concentrate resources in the key strategic area (East Asia), is a necessity and that this will not lead to the diminution of America's standing in the eyes of competing nations (far from it, it will in fact enhance the prestige and reputation of the US as a hegemon intent on defending its core interests). Scaling back American commitments is an option that exerts a powerful influence across segments of US policymaking traditionally associated with isolationist tendencies. Moreover, 'entrapment'⁸³ – the situation where a smaller ally can take advantage of a bigger ally and exhibit reckless behaviour – is increasingly part of the debate regarding the future trajectory of American foreign policy. The underlying logic is that the US should not maintain a commitment to the security of smaller and at times belligerent allies. However, empirical research indicates that states fight for diverse reasons, with security being simply one of them.⁸⁴ Therefore, in regions which include a variety of ideologies and religions, unsettled historical grievances and economies with varying degrees of openness and interdependence, retrenchment may not be an optimal choice.

This is certainly the case in East Asia where a continued US presence can actually be a stabilising factor for two reasons:

- 1) There is no other regional power that can balance China in the long term.
- 2) More importantly, as Mearsheimer notes, 'No amount of goodwill can ameliorate the intense security competition that sets in when an aspiring hegemon appears in Eurasia'.⁸⁵

As will be explained via the historical exempla below, there are simply no sound geopolitical and geostrategic reasons for the US to retrench vis-à-vis China. One might retort, then what about the constraints that are being imposed on US resources (both economic and military) due to imperial overreach? The simple answer proposed by this volume, as hinted above, is that America should focus

on its core interests (containing the main challenger, China) and divest itself of other lesser (and costly) burdens. To put it bluntly, America should retrench in the Middle East and Europe (withdraw any meaningful presence, leaving only vital military garrisons in strategic locations such as Poland – to prevent the creation of a Germany-Russia union, the only other geopolitical combination in Eurasia other than China and Japan that could seriously contend for power with the US) and commit all available resources to the Asia-Pacific. Why this is a logical and viable geostrategy will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters. What countermeasures are available for China as the challenger will also be discussed.

1.3 Summary

A myriad of different factors impact on the fate of superpowers. Geopolitics and geostrategy are but one of those crucial factors and this book certainly does not argue that geopolitics can always trump other important imperial concerns (whether they be institutional and economic or ideological concerns and developments). However, it would be a mistake to neglect lessons learned from history with the arrogant assumption that modernity renders current world powers immune from geopolitics and the effects of egregious geostrategic errors.

The following chapters will argue that the geopolitical developments of Late Antiquity are strikingly analogous (though certainly not identical) to the geopolitical order of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Crucial lessons can be learned by contemporary powers by observing how the superpowers of antiquity dealt with analogous situations. In the following analysis, the book will argue that the Inner Asian Empires of the Huns/Xiongnu and the later Avars were the geopolitical equivalents of the Soviet Union/Russia, a challenger that often refused to abide by the institutional and systemic rules set by the three superpowers: Rome, Han China and Sassanian Iran. We will examine how similar (and at times different) the approaches of these three powers to the Inner Asian threat were to the US and Chinese approaches to the challenge posed by Soviet Russia.

After that threat had subsided the Eastern Roman Empire (the geopolitical equivalent of the United States in Late Antiquity) was faced with a very similar geopolitical dilemma as the United States in the post-Cold War world. A brief unipolar moment was followed by the renewed challenge from an old traditional power, Sassanian Persia (whose history to a certain extent mirrors that of modern China). The resulting cataclysmic feud between the two powers, which was badly mismanaged and led to a devastating, mutually destructive conflict (largely because of poor, short-sighted geostrategic decisions made by both sides), resulted in the eventual eclipse of both superpowers in the 7th century AD at the hands of the Muslim Arabs. Whether this was all avoidable and if so what options were open to the two empires and by extension also to the US and China in the analogous modern world will constitute the topics of discussion for the remainder of this volume.

Notes

- 1 Mearsheimer (2005); Gertz (2000), 199; Mosher (2000), 99; Kagan (2005), just to name a few.
- 2 For an excellent analysis of geopolitics and geostrategy literature see Grygiel (2006), 21–39.
- 3 For the coining of the term Afro-Eurasia see Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997), 149.
- 4 See Mackinder (1904), 421–39; Holger (1999), 218–41.
- 5 Gilpin (1981), 29.
- 6 Mearsheimer (2001), 40.
- 7 Gramsci (1971); Arrighi (2000).
- 8 Modelski (1978), 214–35.
- 9 Keohane and Nye (1989), 44.
- 10 Goldstein (1988), 281.
- 11 Kindleberger (1973), 28.
- 12 For discussion see Snidal (1985).
- 13 Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990).
- 14 Ikenberry (2001), 48.
- 15 Wallerstein (1984), 38.
- 16 Organski and Kugler (1980), 19.
- 17 Organski (1968); Organski and Kugler (1980); Modelski (1987); Kugler and Lemke (1996).
- 18 Tammen et al. (2000), 8.
- 19 Tammen et al. (2000), 16.
- 20 Kennedy (1989).
- 21 Chan (2008), 51–62.
- 22 Wayman (1996), 147.
- 23 Tammen et al. (2000), 27.
- 24 Tammen et al. (2000), 9.
- 25 Layne (2008), 16.
- 26 Mearsheimer (2006), 160–2.
- 27 Mearsheimer (2001), 31.
- 28 Mearsheimer (2001), 3.
- 29 Jervis (1976).
- 30 Organski (1968), 329.
- 31 Mueller (1989), 218–19.
- 32 Organski and Kugler (1980), 104–46.
- 33 Levy (1983), 1.
- 34 Tammen et al. (2000), 21–4.
- 35 Organski (1958), 326.
- 36 Nye (1990), 185.
- 37 Gilpin (1981), 29.
- 38 Gilpin (1981), 15.
- 39 Krasner (1982).
- 40 Kindleberger (1976).
- 41 Strange (1987).
- 42 Ikenberry (2001), 47.
- 43 Snidal (1985), 579–614.
- 44 Nye (2004), 39.
- 45 Nye (2004), 40.
- 46 Tamen et al. (2000), 23.
- 47 Ikenberry (2001), 75.
- 48 Nye (1996), 66.

18 *Introduction*

- 49 Leeds (1999), 979–1002.
- 50 Bueno de Mesquita and Silversson (1995), 841–85; Hess and Orphanides (1995), 828–46.
- 51 Mansfield and Snyder (2005); Baliga and Lucca (2011), 458–86.
- 52 Ikenberry (2001), 63.
- 53 Ikenberry (1998/99), 60.
- 54 Vasquez (1993).
- 55 Lemke (2002).
- 56 Mansbach and Vasquez (1981).
- 57 Vasquez and Hennehan (2001), 123–38; Holsti (1991).
- 58 Hensel (2000), 58.
- 59 Rosecrance (1986).
- 60 Gartzke (2007), 166–91.
- 61 Taylor (1994), 151–62.
- 62 Choucri and North (1975).
- 63 Van Evera (1999).
- 64 Moore and Davis (2001), 89–103.
- 65 Van Evera (1994), 5–39.
- 66 Russett and Oneal (2001); Gartzke and Quan Li (2003), 561–86.
- 67 Liberman (1996).
- 68 Walt (1985), 3–43.
- 69 Hurd (2007), 194–213.
- 70 Mann (2003), 206–51.
- 71 Mandelbaum (2010), 114–19.
- 72 Gilpin (1981), 192–4.
- 73 Kaplan (2010).
- 74 Kagan (2009).
- 75 Press (2005); Mercer (1996).
- 76 Snyder and Diesing (1978), 190.
- 77 Zakaria (1998), 43; Kagan (2003).
- 78 Lippmann (1943), 7–8.
- 79 MacDonald and Parent (2011), 9.
- 80 MacDonald and Parent (2011), 29.
- 81 MacDonald and Parent (2011), 10.
- 82 Waltz (1979), 125.
- 83 Snyder (1997).
- 84 For a detailed discussion see Lebow (2010).
- 85 Mearsheimer (2006), 162.

2 The geopolitical situation

The superpowers and the Huns

From the end of the 3rd century BC onwards, in the space of less than a century, the Eurasian world witnessed the formation of three, enduring, regional, hegemonic powers: Rome in the Mediterranean Basin after its triumph over arch-rival Carthage; China unified first under Qin and then the Han dynasty; and in the middle of the 2nd century BC Persia, reconstituted as a major geopolitical player under the Parthian Arsacid dynasty (the legacy of which would continue later under the Sassanian dynasty). These three empires were the superpowers of antiquity and their geopolitical dominance would endure for over half a millennium. Yet, the hegemony of these empires was almost immediately put to the test by a fourth disruptive power group, the Inner Asian Huns.

2.1 Han China and the Huns

The first of the superpowers to come face to face with this novel geopolitical challenge was the Chinese Empire of the Han dynasty. The Chinese referred to this Inner Asian threat as the ‘Xiongnu’. Whether these Xiongnu are identical with the later Huns of Europe and Central Asia, who troubled the other two superpowers (Rome and Persia), has been a contentious issue in scholarship for centuries. The first scholar to raise that possibility was the Jesuit missionary Deguignes (1721–1800 AD) in the 18th century. It was a remarkable guess and the most recent research on the subject tends to strongly support Deguignes’ views. The most decisive evidence in favour of the Xiongnu-Hun identification are two translations of Indian Buddhist sutras, namely the *Tathagataguhyasutra* and the *Lalitavistara*, which were translated into Chinese by Zhu Fahu, a monk from Dunhuang in 280 AD and 308 AD respectively. In these translations Zhu Fahu identifies without any ambiguity or generalisation the *Huna* (Huns), then a relatively distant people to the Indians, with the Xiongnu, as a specific political entity adjacent to China.¹ Another important piece of evidence is a slightly later letter of a Sogdian merchant Nanaivande concerning the fall of Luoyang to the Southern Xiongnu in the early 4th century AD. There again the Xiongnu are referred to as the Huns.² Furthermore, contemporary Chinese historical sources mainly the *Weilüe* and *Weishu* from the 3rd to the 6th centuries AD, also provide convincing evidence that supports the identification of the 4th and 5th century AD Huns (in

particular the White Huns of Central Asia) with the earlier Xiongnu.³ As a result, the majority of Inner Asian and Central Asian studies experts now accept the likelihood that the Chionites mentioned in Sassanian Persian sources and the Hunas mentioned in Indian sources shared an identical ethnonym or political name with the Xiongnu and perhaps also with the European Huns.

Having the same name of course does not mean that the Huns of Late Antiquity were the same racial or ethnic group as the Xiongnu of the 3rd century BC. The core Hunnic tribes may indeed have derived from the former territories of the Xiongnu. However, the various Hunnic states of Late Antiquity are likely to have absorbed different ethnic and political groups during their expansions into Western Eurasia. What does seem very likely is that the later Huns of Central Asia and Europe traced their political origins to the earlier Xiongnu Empire of Inner Asia. The Xiongnu with its sophisticated political and military system provided the model of empire building to these later successor states.

When the Han succeeded Qin as the dynastic rulers of a unified Tian Xia (All under Heaven), it was considered inconceivable that any state in the known world could possibly challenge the supremacy of the Chinese Empire. The Xiongnu were hardly considered an equal, especially since they had been decisively defeated by the preceding Qin dynasty and expelled from their original homeland, the Ordos region in what is now Inner Mongolia.⁴ During the days of Qin Shihuang (the infamous First Emperor of China) the Xiongnu Huns were only one among many steppe confederacies competing with each other for dominance in the crowded eastern steppes. They were in fact sandwiched between two more powerful Inner Asian steppe peoples: the proto-Mongolic Donghu to the east and the Indo-European Yuezhi to the west. To the south of course lay the even more powerful Chinese Empire. The Xiongnu were trapped in an unenviable geopolitical situation.

All this, however, was abruptly changed by the astonishing exploits of the first great Inner Asian conqueror, Modu Chanyu of the Xiongnu. After seizing the Xiongnu throne via a bloody coup, Modu defeated both the Donghu to the east and the Yuezhi to the west. In the north Modu campaigned with equal success against tribes such as the Hunyu and the Dingling. In a matter of decades Modu united all of eastern Inner Asia and created an empire larger than that of Alexander the Great. The standing army of the Xiongnu was also expanded to 300,000 men, now a match for the huge armies of Han China. The empire that Modu created was furthermore maintained by a highly sophisticated political system, an elaborate hierarchy based on the Xiongnu's military organisation.

There is a persistent ongoing debate about the nature of this empire that Modu Chanyu created. Traditional historiography tended to classify the Xiongnu and all other steppe political entities as primitive tribal confederacies of unruly nomads. It is probably true that whenever the image of the Huns is conjured up the general public imagines fur-clad barbarians running wild, rapacious nomads pillaging their peaceful sedentary neighbours. However, this is far from an accurate portrayal. The Huns/Xiongnu and other Inner Asians were not nomads. All the so-called 'nomads' of the Eurasian steppes were peoples whose territories were

clearly defined. Many, though not all, of these peoples were predominantly pastoralists, who moved about in periodic migration cycles in order to secure pasture for their livestock. However, they did so strictly within a fixed territorial space. It is therefore highly misleading to imagine that 'nomads' of the Eurasian steppe region lived in a political and geographical void with no territory and political control. Far from it, Inner Asian pastoralists such as the Huns operated under tight political organisation and were in fact rarely homogeneous in either lifestyle or ethnic composition.

It is often claimed that Modu's Xiongnu Empire was a nomadic empire, an empire on horseback. That is also a myth. Recent progress in Xiongnu archaeology has shown conclusively that the Xiongnu/Hun Empire actually consisted of both pastoralist and sedentary populations. Four fully excavated Xiongnu cemeteries (Ivolga, Dyrestui, Burkhan Tolgoi and Daodunzi) and thousands of other recorded tombs in Transbaikalia and Mongolia are providing researchers with a radically different picture of Xiongnu society and economy.⁵ Pastoralism, which was identified mainly with the Xiongnu governing elite, was only one aspect of the Xiongnu imperial economy. Archaeological discoveries have revealed up to 20 walled enclosures/settlements that contain evidence of agricultural and even horticultural activity and these were discovered not in the usual agrarian regions such as the Tarim Basin and Gansu (the southwestern sector of the Xiongnu Empire), but deep within Xiongnu territory further to the north. These settlements were permanent sites with buildings of various types and sizes.⁶ The Xiongnu were also actively involved in international trade. Grave goods found in Xiongnu cemeteries have yielded luxury items such as Chinese metal and lacquer vessels, foreign textiles and also items originating from the far West from the Greco-Bactrian areas in Central Asia.⁷

The political sophistication of the Xiongnu is also striking. The Xiongnu political system can best be described as an 'autocracy', a complex hierarchy descending from an emperor (called Shanyu/Chanyu)⁸ to lesser kings and sub-kings, a 'quasi-feudal' order.⁹ The emperor governed his realm by utilising the services of a specialised bureaucracy headed by the so-called Gu-du marquesses who coordinated the affairs of the empire and managed communications with governors and vassals on behalf of the central government. The empire was divided firstly into four principal, regional governorships, two in the East and two in the West: the Worthy King of the Left and the Luli King of the Left in the East and the Worthy King of the Right and the Luli King of the Right in the West. Each of these four governorships in turn had its own government bureaucracy.¹⁰ There was apparently also a supreme aristocratic council of six top ranking nobles. This council included the Rizhu kings of the Left and Right (*Hou Hanshu* 79. 2944), the Wenyu kings of the Left and Right, and the Zhanjiang kings of the Left and Right.¹¹

In addition to these senior office holders there were also the 24 imperial leaders/ministers (each titled Ten Thousand Horsemen), who governed the large and strategically important provinces of the Xiongnu Empire. These nobles were themselves classified into separate Eastern and Western groups in a dual system

and the designated successor to the Xiongnu imperial throne was appointed the Wise King of the Left, as the nominal ruler of the Eastern half of the empire. At the bottom of the administrative hierarchy there was a large group of subordinate or vassal tribal leaders (labelled sub-kings, prime ministers, chief commandants, household administrators, *chü-ch'ü* officials etc.). These lower-ranked officials were placed under the control of the 24 imperial governors, but depending on circumstances enjoyed a high level of local autonomy.¹²

Former rulers of conquered peoples were sometimes allowed to remain as sub-kings/chiefs under Xiongnu over-kings. Thus, the 'Commandant in charge of Slaves', who operated under the overlordship of a Xiongnu sub-king, had the authority to tax minor conquered states such as Karashar and Kalmagan (in what is now Xinjiang province in western China) and to conscript corvée labour. A non-decimal system of ranks was used for the political administration of tribes and territories within the empire during peacetime and these included groups of many different sizes. However, a stricter system of decimal ranks (thousands, hundreds, tens etc.) was used in wartime when large-scale armies were formed from troops conscripted from different parts of the empire.¹³ A census was furthermore taken to determine the empire's reserve of manpower and livestock.¹⁴

The Xiongnu Empire was thus without any doubt an enormous imperial state¹⁵ with the political, administrative and military sophistication rivalling that of its sedentary rivals such as China. It was because of this reason that the Xiongnu constituted such a huge threat to Chinese hegemony. If the Xiongnu were a mere petty tribal confederacy, they would not have made any noticeable impression on the military and economic behemoth that was the Chinese Han Empire. Indeed the impact of Modu Chanyu's gigantic military and political machine was immediately felt by the Chinese. In 200 BC Modu at Ping Cheng decisively defeated and surrounded the army of Emperor Gaozu of the Han. Gaozu only extricated himself from this debacle by agreeing to humiliating terms. He was to surrender one of his daughters as a concubine to the Xiongnu Chanyu and agreed to pay the Xiongnu an annual tribute consisting of silk, wine, grain and other foodstuffs. Han China, thus, became a tributary state of the Xiongnu Empire. During the reign of Han Wendi (179–57 BC) the tribute owed to the Xiongnu was further increased to 1000 pieces of gold a year (*Han Shu*, 94B:12b). The Han Chinese would continue to pay this tribute to first Modu, then Laoshang and finally to Gunchen Chanyu.

China was thus suddenly faced with a challenger which was militarily superior to it, at least temporarily. Its initial response to this challenge was war, but after a disastrous defeat, the imperial court quickly shifted to a policy of appeasement and the paying of tribute to buy off the powerful foe. This policy even had its own name, *heqin*, and became the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy for almost the whole of the 2nd century BC.¹⁶ China in effect conceded its hegemonic status to the Xiongnu in order to protect its heartland from destructive wars, which it could not win. It also adopted a policy of retrenchment, abandoning completely formal Qin territories to the north (the disputed Ordos region to the Xiongnu) and south (Guangdong to the newly formed Nanyue kingdom). These policies allowed the Han to consolidate its core territories and also provided the empire with the necessary

breathing space to strengthen its military forces so that they could rival the armies of the Xiongnu. However, as we shall see later, when the balance of power began to shift again in China's favour, the Chinese adopted a more aggressive approach to reclaim their hegemonic status, which they had earlier so humiliatingly conceded to the Xiongnu.

2.2 Rome and the Huns

A corresponding geopolitical situation was also faced by the two other super-powers, Rome and Persia, later in the 4th century AD. We begin with the Roman Empire. Before the establishment of the Hunnic Empire in Europe in the late 4th century AD the geopolitical map of Western Eurasia had been fairly stable for nearly four centuries. The Mediterranean and its hinterlands in Europe, Asia and Africa had been dominated by Rome. By the 4th century it was divided into two halves, the much weaker Western Empire and the more dynamic Eastern Empire (sometimes also referred to in historiography as the Byzantine Empire). The Roman Empire had just weathered the so-called 3rd-century military crisis, during which Roman generals in command of regional armies marched with ever-growing frequency to Rome to claim or rather to usurp the imperial title.¹⁷ This internal instability, which regularly left the borders of the empire poorly defended, then presented an inviting prospect for those perennial troublemakers of Antiquity, the Germanic tribes: the Alamanni, Franks and the Goths. The resourceful Goths, after somehow managing to master the art of seafaring, took to the high seas and plundered the vulnerable maritime provinces of the empire.¹⁸ The incursions of the Goths on land, was no less destructive and in AD 251 the Goths dealt an astonishing defeat on the Romans by killing the hapless Emperor Decius in battle.¹⁹ The subsequent invasion of Roman territory by the Alamanni and the Franks in the years 269–70 matched the spectacular success of the Goths in the east. The barbarians of the west easily penetrated all the way into the very heartland of the empire and in fact almost reached the very gates of Rome itself.²⁰

Because of the famous, but highly distorted vision of Late Antiquity and the later Roman world left to us by Edward Gibbon the general public and even some in academia were in the past prone to thinking that this 3rd century disaster spelled the beginning of the end of the Roman Empire. However, more recent research on the state of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity has yielded a very different picture. In the following 4th century (when Rome according to Gibbon was supposedly in terminal decline), in terms of administrative organisation, advanced bureaucracy, and build-up of military manpower,²¹ the empire actually strengthened itself.²² As Matthews has argued, the imperial government of mid-4th century AD was unmatched in Greco-Roman history 'in its scale and complexity of organisation'.²³ There was indeed a significant transition from 'soft' to 'hard' government, which brought about an unparalleled centralisation of the imperial government that was both more effective and intrusive.²⁴

This centralisation of imperial authority also brought about the revival of Roman military power, which had been eroded to the point of near collapse in the

preceding third century. Under the direction of Diocletian and his colleagues, the famous tetrarchy, new political experiments were implemented and in the early 4th century AD the number of legions in the Roman army compared to the 3rd century armies under the Severan emperors increased dramatically from 33 to over 67.²⁵ In the Eastern provinces alone there were 28 legions, 70 cavalry units, 54 auxiliary *alae* and 54 cohorts.²⁶

Economically also, particularly in the Eastern Empire, the 4th and 5th centuries AD were a time of marked prosperity, economic recovery and population increase.²⁷ In other words, the Roman Empire of Late Antiquity, at the very least its eastern half, was certainly not an empire in decline. Nor was even its western half on the brink of collapse. Far from it both halves of the empire, especially the East, exhibited a vitality unseen in the previous century. The one notable difference in this late empire from the so-called 'high' empire of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD was the fact that the balance of power within the empire had shifted definitively to the eastern half, rendering the western half, a poorer dependant of the East. The brief stability of the 4th century, however, did not last and Rome soon found itself reeling due to another Germanic invasion. This new Germanic warpath was triggered by the expansion of the Hunnic Empire into Europe.²⁸

The Hunnic invasion generated a crisis in which the field armies of the Romans were put to the test against the Eastern Goths and their Alan allies, who immediately showed the Romans the extent to which the traditional Mediterranean mode of warfare based on armoured infantry was both outdated and patently inferior to the new mode of warfare originating in the Eurasian steppes. The Romans to be sure tried their best to bring their armies up to date. The legions of the 4th century were trimmed in size with less emphasis on heavily armoured and highly immobile infantry, and a heavier focus on cavalry and mobility. The reduction in the overall number of infantry in the legions by no means suggested a decline in the quality of the legions as fighting units. Rather the shift to strengthening the quality of the cavalry at the expense of the infantry, as mentioned above, simply reflected the changing nature of warfare in Late Antiquity. The more mobile and manoeuvrable field armies of the Late empire (that were led by experienced, professional soldiers, rather than civilian amateurs)²⁹ were designed to effectively counter the menace posed by barbarian enemies of the 4th century AD, who increasingly exhibited the mode of warfare of the Eurasian steppes, warfare that privileged rapid movement and mobility, in sharp contrast to the static, slow-moving warfare of the Classical Mediterranean World.³⁰ Despite the downsizing of the legions in terms of infantry, as Lactantius comments, the overall size of the army had actually been greatly increased.³¹ By the end of the 4th century the Roman army at least on paper numbered anywhere between 400,000 and 600,000 men.³²

However, the upgrading of the imperial army did not entirely compensate for its inherent tactical deficiencies. No matter how much the Romans improved on the tactical efficiency of their cavalry, their armies, at least initially, simply could not counter effectively the proto-Blitzkrieg like tactics employed by their Central Asian enemies such as the Huns and the Alans. However, the real problem faced by the Roman Empire in the 4th century AD was not the presence of militarily

superior barbarian armies on its frontiers. Rather, the more existential crisis was the formation of a geopolitical alternative to the Roman hegemony, the enormous Hunnic Empire of continental Europe that stretched from the Rhine to the Volga, and from the Danube to the Baltic coasts.

It has often been argued in scholarship that the Huns were so barbarous and primitively organised that their level of political organisation was inferior to that of even the Germanic tribes they conquered and ruled for over 70 years.³³ The Huns have at best been allotted a peripheral role in what was arguably the single most important event in the formation of Western Europe, the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire.³⁴ They are never considered as the prime agents of the cataclysmic changes that they brought about.

However, in the same way that we cannot hope to understand the history of 20th century Eurasia without acknowledging the central role played by the Soviet Union both geopolitically and ideologically in that geographical space (to the detriment of its inhabitants),³⁵ the events of the 4th and 5th centuries AD in Western Eurasia, from Central Asia to the Atlantic, can only be accurately understood, if we place the Huns at the centre of the geopolitical debate and analyse historical developments from a Central Eurasian perspective. The diminution or neglect of the Hunnic Empire in modern historiography, largely stems from the myths concerning their society and culture internalised via the more or less literal reading of the mythological account on the Huns written by Ammianus Marcellinus. Famously in Ammianus, our principle source for the early history of the Huns in Europe, the Huns are mythologised to the extent that they become practically unidentifiable in the real world. Numerous scholars have already pointed out that Ammianus' account of the Huns belongs in the category of fairy tales.³⁶ Yet, regrettably, even some of the greatest scholars of Late Antique history have until recently continued to advance theories on the political organisation (or lack thereof) of the Huns that seriously internalise this mythological representation of the Huns found in Ammianus.³⁷

The error of taking literally the description of the Huns in Ammianus has already been critiqued in detail by Maenchen-Helfen, Richter³⁸ and King. They have shown without a shadow of a doubt that Ammianus' descriptions of the Huns are based on earlier Greco-Roman ethnography on steppe nomads and are certainly not an eyewitness account or even based on semi-reliable sources. There is, therefore, neither the need nor the space here to point out the ridiculous nature of every detail of Ammianus' description in full. However, just to point out the most glaringly obvious discrepancies between fact and fiction, the claim in Ammianus that the Huns practiced no agriculture whatsoever,³⁹ had no fixed laws or rites, moved around chaotically like fugitives, and made clothes out of the skins of forest rodents (31.2.10) are borrowings from Pompeius Trogus' description of the Scythians,⁴⁰ which in turn is loosely based on Herodotus' description of steppe peoples such as the Scythians and the *eschatoi andron*, e.g. the androphagoi who are governed by no rules or traditions (4.106).⁴² Other descriptions of the Huns such as the Hunnic practice of eating half-raw meat may derive ultimately from Pomponius Mela,⁴³ that

the Huns somehow lack metal to make weapons and cooking utensils, again ultimately hark back to garbled recollections gathered by Ammianus' literary sources from Herodotus about the Scythians using bones (animal and human) to cook their meat and for making drinking cups (4.61, 65).

There is scarcely any need to enumerate the many ways in which all these descriptions are simply unreal. Without iron weapons the Huns would never have conquered the Goths and Alans⁴⁴ and the defining archaeological marker of Hunnic presence anywhere in Eurasia is the Hunnic bronze cauldrons!⁴⁵ Scholarship has progressively recognised the impossibility of defending the veracity of Ammianus' 'ethnographic' descriptions. However, regrettably there is still a tendency to attribute some validity to another myth found in Ammianus regarding the Huns, that they lacked complex political organisation:

Et deliberatione super rebus proposita seriis, hoc habitu omnes in commune consultant. Aguntur autem nulla severitate regali, sed tumultuario primatum ductu contenti, perrumpunt quicquid inciderit

And when deliberation is called for about weighty matters, they all consult as a common body in that fashion. They are subject to no royal restraint, but they are content with the disorderly government of their important men, and led by them they force their way through every obstacle (31.2.7)

Ammianus creates the image of a Hunnic society that lacks kingship and whose people improvise policy on the spot as a common body under the disorderly leadership of their important men, a society at the lowest possible level of social evolution.

As a result of internalising aspects of these assertions made by Ammianus, it has been assumed that the Hunnic state in Europe evolved slowly from a chaotic agglomeration of tribes (as mentioned above, considered to be inferior in organisation to even the Germanic tribes conquered by the Huns) to multiple kingship and then sole kingship under Attila.⁴⁶

The lack of enthusiasm among many scholars specialising in Roman history for comparative research and Central Asian historical data already available, has caused immense difficulties in accurately assessing the real impact of the Huns and their empire on Europe. It is as though, to use the same analogy as above, historiography on the Soviet Union was suddenly neglected in all discussion of the history of 20th-century Eurasia. A more in-depth comparative analysis that critically examines both Late Roman history and Central Asian history⁴⁷ shows that the Huns, contrary to Ammianus' mythical account, possessed a highly sophisticated state or 'early state' structure originating from state or 'early state' models. These models were already available in the steppe region since the time of imperial entities such as the Royal Scythians and more importantly the great, universal steppe empire of the Xiongnu mentioned earlier in the chapter.

That the Huns did not originate from a region mired in 'political backwardness' can immediately be realised when we recall the level of administrative

sophistication achieved among the Xiongnu long before the appearance of the Huns in Europe.

We have already discussed above the validity of identifying the Huns with the Xiongnu. More important for our purposes, however, is the survival/existence among the European Huns and other contemporary steppe powers of political institutions possessed earlier by the Xiongnu. If it can be clearly demonstrated that complex political organisation of the Xiongnu type existed in the steppe region during the time of the Huns and that a similar system was utilised by the Huns themselves, we can then quickly grasp the reasons why the Huns were the one geopolitical factor that was powerful enough to threaten the Roman hegemony in Europe.

Examples of Xiongnu-like political organisation in the steppe during the time of the Huns are in fact easy to find. To name just one prominent example, in the eastern steppes another gigantic steppe empire existed at the same time as the Hunnic Empire in Europe, the Rouran Empire. Even a short examination of its political organisation reveals that the Rouran system is virtually a direct replica of the Xiongnu system. The Rouran Empire like that of the Xiongnu was divided into two principal wings in a dual system with the ruler of the East holding greater prestige and overall authority,⁴⁸ though later the Western ruler seems to have reversed the equation (thus mirroring a similar process among the Huns under Attila, who overthrew his Eastern overlord Bleda).⁴⁹ The empire had a core Rouran tribe leading ethnically related tribes as vassals and holding in servitude conquered tribes like the Uighurs under Zhi-payé-zhi.⁵⁰ Shelun, the first Rouran Khagan (emperor) enforced in the Xiongnu manner a compulsory registration of all warriors who were instructed to follow strict rules of conduct in battle. Disobedience was punished with severe penalties which mirror the policies of the Great Xiongnu Chanyu Modu.⁵¹

The entire nation was organised in a decimal system, again exactly like the Xiongnu. The 1,000 formed the detachment (run/ military head) and 100 the banner (Zhuang commanded by the Shawu/ leader or commander). In all, in times of full mobilisation between 100,000 and 300,000 horsemen could be raised for military service (again approximating the size of earlier Xiongnu armies).⁵² Political power was concentrated in the hands of a charismatic, ruling clan. The ruler, Khagan, was chosen usually from among the direct male heirs of the previous ruler or from a collateral line within the royal family. The closest relatives of the Khagan were given fiefs, usually in the form of large military units with the title of Xielifa.⁵³ Under them were the leader of the 1,000 and 100, usually tribal chiefs and clan elders of different levels. Among them were chosen the dachen, the grandees of the empire, classed as high and low ranking with titles distributed at the will of the Khagan. 'It was a complex hierarchical multi-level system'.⁵⁴

The succession to the Rouran throne also shows features that we see in Hunnic contexts. The ruling Khagan would always try to pass on his throne to his sons. However, if a close relative had greater prestige, this could lead to a succession struggle, which in most cases ended without bloodshed⁵⁵ (though there were notable exceptions). Thus out of 16 Khagans, eight were collateral members of the

royal family, a nephew who, like Attila and Bleda, inherited the throne from an uncle. Under the rule of Doulun Khagan, however, the system could not prevent bloodshed. The Uighurs under a Rouran ruler Abuzhiluo (we see here the typical steppe practice, also found among the Xiongnu, the Huns and the later Turks as well, of appointing a member of the royal clan or a close subordinate from the ruling tribe, Rouran, Hun or Turk, as the ruler of a vassal horde),⁵⁶ 100,000 tents in all, revolted and had to be suppressed (the constant Hun demands to the Romans for the return of fugitives comes to mind and also the destruction of the horde of fugitive Goths under Radagaisus by Uldin in 406 AD).⁵⁷ In the process two armies were raised to suppress the rebellion. One was led by the Khagan, the other by his uncle Nagai. The Khagan suffered defeat, but Nagai had success. This was interpreted by Rouran troops to be a sign that heaven's favour had left the Khagan and passed to Nagai. Nagai murdered the Khagan and ascended the throne in a coup,⁵⁸ demonstrating the extraordinary importance attached to military success in steppe politics.

We also hear that a later Rouran Khagan Anagui⁵⁹ built a capital city, Mumocheng encircled with two walls (Liang Shu 54), and hired Chinese defectors as clerks to maintain written records (Song Shu 95). The Khagan was also guarded by a staff of bodyguards who watched over the person the ruler in shifts.⁶⁰ This Rouran institution would be inherited by the Turks who overthrew them in the 6th century. What we can see from these observations is that the Xiongnu political legacy had long survived them in the steppe region.

The Hunnic system in Europe was the same type of political system. In the fifth century, Priscus – an excellent eyewitness to the Hunnic polity, who participated in the East Roman embassy to the Hunnic court – gives us a contemporary overview of the political organisation and the immense power of the Hunnic Empire. Priscus states, 'he (Attila) has a military force which no nation can withstand'.⁶¹ Contrary to the somewhat mistaken assessment of many modern critics who would limit Attila's realm to basically Hungary and no further East or West, an under-estimation that results from their refusal to countenance Hunnic capacity for state organisation, Priscus clearly points out that Hunnic territory in the East stretched to an area very close to those of the Medes (i.e. the Persians in Iran).⁶² He records an invasion, probably in the 420s⁶³ into Media (Iran), launched under the command of Basich and Kursich, members of the royal family (τῶν βασιλείων Σκυθῶν) and commanders of a large force (πολλοῦ πλήθους ἄρχοντας). Attila according to Priscus' source, a man from the Western Empire called Constantiolus, whom Priscus met during the embassy (another eyewitness source, not hear-say), ruled over the whole of Scythia and even the islands of the ocean.⁶⁴

Attila was apparently contemplating the conquest of Sassanian Persia and this is treated as a real possibility by Priscus.⁶⁵ The Sassanians were at this time under severe pressure from the Kidarite and Hephthalite Huns (the Eastern cousins of the European Huns) and, as we shall see later, were reduced to vassal status shortly after the death of Attila by the Hephthalites. When the Romans with Priscus pray that God would induce Attila to attack the Persians and not the Romans, Constantiolus warns them that if the Huns conquered Persia, Attila

would no longer tolerate Roman independence and 'holding them to be obviously his servants' he would force the Romans to call him an emperor.⁶⁶ Attila was so confident in his own power that he is said to have regarded his generals as equals to the emperors of the Romans.⁶⁷

Priscus' account tells us several critical things about the political organisation of the Hunnic Empire. Firstly, we see two members of the royal family holding important commands over large military forces in the same way as among the contemporary Rouran in the east. Earlier in the account Priscus also mentions that Edeco was one of the intimates of Attila (*epitedeios*),⁶⁸ who guarded the person of the king on a rotational basis. We see here the exact equivalent of the Rouran practice of royal bodyguards. We also hear of Attila's *logades* (picked men), high ranking dignitaries, whose respective roles we will discuss shortly below.⁶⁹ As among the Rouran, there are indications of a rudimentary bureaucratic organisation. This can be deduced from the important role given to Onegesius.⁷⁰ Onegesius who is clearly the equivalent of the 'grand vizier', seems to have presided over this bureaucracy. His power was such that he sat on the right of the Hunnic king in banquets, in the position of honour. His wife, noted Priscus, was also given courteous treatment by Attila and Onegesius owned the second largest palace in the Hunnic royal capital.⁷¹ Other key members of the bureaucracy, who seem to have functioned in a similar way to the Gudu marquesses of the Xiongnu system, were possible ex-Roman defectors such as Rusticius, Constantius and Orestes (the latter being the father of the future Western Roman emperor Romulus Augustulus). The Romanised population of conquered Pannonia and other Danubian provinces seem to have been the source of these ex-'Romans' working for the Huns.⁷²

The Huns, furthermore, without any doubt possessed the same hierarchical, stratified structure of government which we have seen among the earlier Xiongnu and the contemporary Rouran. Olympiodorus, a reliable eyewitness, who like Priscus also travelled on an embassy to the Huns some time before the reign of Ruga (Attila's uncle), in order to negotiate with the Hunnic sub-king Donatus, gives us the first indication of this system in operation. He records that Donatus, who was in unknown circumstances murdered, was a vassal of the 'ὁ τῶν ῥηγῶν πρῶτος' (the first of the kings) Charaton.⁷³

Here we have the earliest definitive evidence that the Huns practiced the hierarchical division of power among the supreme ruler (Khagan or Chanyu, as among the Rouran and the earlier Xiongnu) and lesser vassal kings. This is also suggested by the identification of the early 5th century Hunnic ruler Uldin as a *regulus* (sub-king). Priscus adds more substantive details. He tells the story of the Akatziri Huns who planned to rebel against Attila with Roman support (a revolt triggered most probably by their growing discontent over the murder of Bleda by Attila).⁷⁴ The revolt failed to gain any traction, however, because, according to Priscus, the Roman ambassadors make a critical error while distributing gifts from the emperor to the leaders of the Akatziri. Kouridachus, who was senior in office (*πρεσβύτερον ὄντα τῇ ἀρχῇ*), was given his gifts second, which was interpreted as denying him proper honours due to his rank (*οὐ κατὰ τάξιν*).⁷⁵ This slight or perceived slight caused Kouridachus to inform Attila about the planned

rebellion and the Hunnic king quickly crushed the insurgency. Attila then commanded Onegesius to install the royal Prince Ellac as overlord of the Akatziri.⁷⁶ The references to ranks, office and precedence clearly suggests that the system of rule that existed among the Huns was essentially the same as that which had existed earlier among the Xiongnu.⁷⁷

Ellac's appointment as ruler/sub-king of the Akatziri also shows the very typical steppe practice, noted also among the Rouran and the earlier Xiongnu, of giving key fiefs to members of the royal family. Attila's Empire would later tear itself apart because of bitter disputes over the distribution of these fiefs among his sons and relatives.⁷⁸ We also hear of Laudaricus (Germanic: *Laudareiks*),⁷⁹ who according to the Gallic chronicle of 511 was a blood relative of Attila (*cognatus Attilae*).⁸⁰ He was another vassal king of an affiliated Germanic tribe in the same way that Ellac was ruler of the eastern Akatziri and Edeco, a prominent courtier, of the Sciri.⁸¹

Dualism, representing the two wings (Left and right or East and West) of the steppe imperial system,⁸² was also very much a feature of the Hunnic Empire. Time and again in Hunnic history we find two principal rulers. Ruga is said to have ruled together with Oktar, his brother.⁸³ They were succeeded by again two principal kings: their nephews Bleda, who ruled the East, and Attila, who succeeded to Oktar's realm in the West.⁸⁴ That Attila ruled the Western half seems to be confirmed by the note in Priscus that Attila was of the Gepid Huns (i.e. his personal fief was the Gepids situated in modern Hungary, the core of the western half of the Hunnic Empire).⁸⁵

Attila after overthrowing Bleda continued to follow this pattern by apportioning the East to his son Ellac in the familiar dual system. Attila is referred to by Priscus as the *praecipuus Hunnorum rex*,⁸⁶ the chief/high king of the Huns,⁸⁷ which again demonstrates clearly that there were other Hunnic kings who ruled under him, Ellac as his Eastern co-ruler (dualism) and sub-kings ruling over lesser sub-divisions of the empire. After a period of chaos following Attila's death again dualism reasserted itself in the succession of Dengizich and Ernak (West and East respectively). The Bulgar successors to the Hunnic Empire also featured two wings, the Kutrigurs (West) and the Utigurs (East), who were ruled presumably by Ernak's descendants.⁸⁸

The logades (picked men), who commanded military units (presumably organised along tribal lines) in the Hunnic Empire, deserve further attention. These logades of the Hunnic king, which include eminent court figures such as Edeco the ruler of the Sciri, Berik 'the ruler of many villages in Scythia' due to his noble birth,⁸⁹ and even men with possibly Roman origins like Orestes, were, as Thompson rightfully notes, primarily responsible for the government of the empire.⁹⁰ These logades were in all likelihood the equivalent of the 24 governors of the left and right which we have seen among the Xiongnu, who administered the main provinces (in the steppe often groups of tribes situated in a fixed region, rather than a strictly defined territorial block) and regulated the relations between the centre and the peripheral vassal sub-kingdoms. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that Edeco and others like him often functioned as ambassadors and *communiqués*⁹¹ to vassal tribes (Onegesius for instance is sent to the Akatziri to

supervise the instalment of Ellac, the Hunnic crown prince, as direct overlord of the tribe)⁹² and also by the fact that they were logades, picked men from among other eminent nobles of the Hunnic realm, who like the governors of the Xiongnu Empire (called Ten Thousand Horsemen) commanded a considerable portion of horsemen allocated to them specifically to govern.⁹³

What is important to note is the fact that these logades did not suddenly turn up under Attila. Thompson suggests probably correctly that the *oikeioi* (retainers) and *lochagoi* (captains) of Uldin, the western Hunnic king of the early 5th century, who ended up betraying him during his campaign against the Romans, were the same as the logades under Attila. These captains/governors during military campaigns not only commanded specific squadrons of Huns assigned to each of them, but also contingents from subject peoples provided by the districts/provinces that they governed.⁹⁴

There was also a distinct and regulated hierarchy among the logades themselves. This is shown by the distinctly Inner Asian seating arrangements during the feasts organised by Attila for the Roman ambassadors. Onegesius and Berik, both logades were seated to the right and left of the Hunnic king, but Onegesius outranking Berik sat to the right of the king which was considered more honourable. This piece of evidence, often just bypassed, is of great significance, because in the old Xiongnu empire and also all other steppe societies the right (signifying the east, with orientation towards the north) had precedence over the left (west). Members of the royal family who ranked even higher than the logades such as Oebersius, the paternal uncle of the king, and the king's eldest son were seated in conspicuous positions of honour as befits their rank right next to the king on the same couch.⁹⁵ Taxes and tribute were also collected from subject peoples either by the logades⁹⁶ or more probably lower-ranking officials under their administration, usually it seems in kind (agricultural produce of various kinds) and often, as in the Roman Empire, in ruthless fashion.⁹⁷ As in the case of the Xiongnu Empire the Huns, despite their reputation for being 'nomads', also had an agricultural base to exploit, consisting mainly of the conquered populations in the Ukraine (like the Goths and others), who had practiced agriculture from the time of the ancient Scythians, and also not inconsiderable number of agricultural workers imported into the empire from Roman territory (usually captives).⁹⁸

Another institution that the Huns inherited from the Xiongnu is the aristocratic institution of the six horns, a group consisting of six top-ranking nobles, the membership of which was exclusively limited to members of the royal family (Xulianti) and the highest ranking noble families, the Huyan, Lan, Xubu and later also the Qiulin that intermarried with the imperial clan. When rendered in Turkic this institution would have been called *Alti* (six) *cur* (nobles). In the Greek transliteration this was rendered *Oultizouroi*.⁹⁹ The College of six *boliades* (boyars/nobles) would also become the distinguishing feature of the Danubian Bulgarian Empire formed by Hunnic descendants.¹⁰⁰ In Volga Bulgaria founded by a branch of the Proto-Bulgars, as in the old Xiongnu Empire, there would be four pre-eminent sub-kings (the equivalent of the old Xiongnu four horns kings, representing the four main divisions of the Empire), who sat to the right of the

supreme ruler.¹⁰¹ The decimal system of military and social organisation, which we find among the Ostrogoths of Theodoric (who originate from the Hunnic Empire), as Wolfram accurately points out, derives from the steppe, i.e. via the Huns and Alans.¹⁰²

The evidence presented above shows clearly that the Huns had the same degree of political sophistication as the Xiongnu and the Rouran. It is erroneous to attribute this complex political system to either Attila's innovations or a process of political evolution that took place in Europe as the Huns came into contact with Germanic tribes. The demonstrable characteristics of the Hunnic political order in the 5th century AD are clearly the residue of inherited Inner Asian political practices, which the Huns already possessed before entering Europe in the 4th century AD, long before Attila or even Ruga came to the throne. It was their political organisation that enabled the Huns to create the first unified empire in European Barbaricum beyond the Roman frontiers. Without their organisational capacity and state institutions, even if we were to maximise in our estimations the potential effects of their obvious military superiority over the Germanic peoples and the Romans, it is hardly conceivable that the Huns would ever have been capable of forming and maintaining such a vast empire. The establishment of an Inner Asian Empire in Europe was what triggered the Roman imperial crisis of the 5th century AD. For the first time Rome had a challenger which posed a serious geopolitical challenge to its regional hegemony.

2.3 Sassanian Persia and the Huns

The Persian Empire of the Sassanian dynasty in the 4th century AD was an established and feared military power, on a par with the mighty Roman Empire with which it had sparred over territory and allegiance of tributary states all throughout the 3rd century AD. The Persians were engaged in yet another clash with the Romans in 350 AD when Shapur II received alarming reports from the east. He was informed that a new unknown foe called the Chionites were invading his territories. Most historians and experts now agree that these Chionites were identical to the Central Asian Huns.¹⁰³ Their arrival represented a major geopolitical shift in the balance of power and concentrated Iran's attention to the East.¹⁰⁴ For the next century and a half Iran would rarely be able to threaten Rome's eastern provinces. The geopolitical implications of this for the Romans will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

The initial war against the Chionites was hard fought and it dragged on for eight long years (350–358 AD). It is not clear how the conflict was ended, but it appears that Shapur somehow managed to forge an uneasy alliance with at least some of the invading Huns. We see the Persians employing the service of Hunnic mercenaries in their siege of the Roman fortress of Amida in 360 AD. During this siege Grumbates (his name being possibly a corruption of the Turkic name Kurum-pat: ruling prince), Shapur's ally and the so-called king of the Chionites, lost his son.¹⁰⁵ The enraged Huns inflicted massive retaliation on the unfortunate defenders of the city.

Perso-Hunnic relations, however, soon deteriorated and Shapur had to concede the loss of Bactria to the Huns by the 370s AD at the latest and also the conquest of Kabul by the Huns in the 380s AD.¹⁰⁶ The loss of the entirety of Iran's eastern territories to the Huns came as an immense shock to the Persians and the geopolitical threat of the Huns crystallised in the formation of Hunnic dynasties in Central Asia headed initially by the Kidarites. Only the strategic oasis city of Merv (in modern Turkmenistan) remained of Iran's eastern possessions.¹⁰⁷

Who exactly these Chionites/Kidarite Huns were and why they posed such an immense geopolitical challenge to the Iranian Empire have puzzled scholarship for decades. Most of the debates on the largely pointless questions regarding the ethnic and racial provenance of the Central Asian Huns have failed to yield satisfactory results. The Huns themselves referred to their polity as the White Huns (Sveta (white) Huna in Indian sources) and this designation is found in both our Roman and Indian sources. Whether these White Huns were ethnically related to the Huns who entered Europe is difficult to answer, since all Hunnic states in Inner Asia and beyond were polyglot, multi-ethnic entities with varying admixtures of peoples and language groups.

What does seem certain is that both the White Huns and the European Huns traced their political origins to the Xiongnu Huns. Our Chinese sources for instance confirm that the White Hunnic conquerors of Central Asia were originally Xiongnu. The *Wei Shu* notes specifically that the 5th century rulers of Sogdia,¹⁰⁸ i.e. the White Huns, are Xiongnu (102.2270) and the same source calls the country ruled by the White Huns wen-na-sha (pronounced Huna sha in Early Middle Chinese, i.e. King of the Huns).¹⁰⁹ Archaeological evidence also supports the Xiongnu-Central Asian Huns connection. A Hunnic-Xiongnu type cauldron was found near the Amu Darya valley in the Khiva area (northwestern Uzbekistan) and two Hunnic funerary cauldrons made of clay were discovered in the delta of the Syr Darya River, which point to the preservation of Xiongnu political and cultural identity among the White Huns. Related artefacts have also been found in areas under the control of the European Huns as well, which leads us to the tentative conclusion that politically and culturally both the European and Central Asian Huns were Xiongnu in origin.¹¹⁰

The *Wei Shu* (103.2290), furthermore, tells us that towards the beginning of the 5th century AD to the northwest of the Rouran Khaganate (in Mongolia) there still existed in the vicinity of the Altai the descendants of the Xiongnu.¹¹¹ *Wei Shu* 102.2278–9 gives more details and relates how the Yeda (i.e. Hephthalites, who displaced the Kidarites in the 5th century AD) ruling clan of the White Huns originated from the Altai Mountains, from where they migrated to the southwest into Central Asia ca. 360 AD. The Altai region is incidentally the area where an earlier 3rd century AD Chinese source, the *Weilüe*, locates the remnants of the Xiongnu in the 3rd century AD.¹¹² Therefore, it is now possible to make the assessment that it is beyond any reasonable doubt that the White Huns were a political group that originated from the old Xiongnu Empire and that this is why they used the same name 'Hun' as their state appellation.

In the same manner as the European Huns vis-à-vis the Roman superpower, these White Huns were able to challenge the hegemony of Sassanian Persia precisely because of the above-mentioned political legacy. The fact that the Central Asian Huns shared with the Huns of Europe and the old Xiongnu the same type of political and military organisation, which enabled them to quickly build their empire, is confirmed by the patchy information that can be gleaned from our sources about them. First of all, the appellation White in their state name is indicative of the traditional Inner Asian political division of the state into four parts (each signified by a colour: white meaning west, blue east, black north and red south).¹¹³ We hear of other components of the Central Asian Hunnic state that likewise bear colour designations: 1) Hara Huna (Black Huns), the word Hara being a corruption of the Turkic word Kara (Black);¹¹⁴ 2) Red Huns (Alkhon from the Turkic Al-for scarlet + Hun, meaning Red Huns (possibly also identical to the Kermichiones)).¹¹⁵

Lack of comprehension of the symbolic meaning of these colours led the 6th century AD eastern Roman historian Procopius to claim that the White Huns were white in skin colour and the Black Huns black. We can safely dismiss this as nonsense, but another comment made by Procopius is noteworthy: that the Hephthalites White Huns were ruled by a king and were guided by a lawful constitution.¹¹⁶ Procopius here confirms that the Huns of Central Asia possessed a sophisticated state structure, which explains how they were able to build a massive empire and maintain it for two centuries. That this is no wishful thinking like the erroneous report of the White Huns being called such because of their white skin, is shown by the following information. In exactly the same fashion as among the European Huns, among the White Huns the succession to the royal throne could pass from uncle to nephew and not necessarily only from father to son.¹¹⁷ The White Huns also practiced the Xiongnu system of appointing vassal kings, e.g. the king of Zabulistan who held an autonomous fief within the empire and was instrumental in spearheading the Hephthalite/Alkhon thrust into India.¹¹⁸ They, furthermore, practiced collective governance under the leadership of several high-ranking *yabghus* and *tegins*.¹¹⁹ In India, which the Central Asian Huns invaded after their successful forays into Iran, first the Kidarite and then the Hephthalite/Alkhon Huns introduced the rule of multiple rajas and rajputs who held territories in fief to their overlord, the Hunnic supreme king. A quasi-feudal method of governance of the Xiongnu (and possibly also Kushan) variety was, thus, expanded in India by the Huns and a transformation in the administration of revenues took place.¹²⁰

With the establishment of this Inner Asian behemoth on its eastern frontier, the Iranian Empire, just like Han China and the Roman Empire, was faced with a dire geopolitical challenge. At first, like the Chinese, the Persians, after their initial military defeat, resorted to tributary payments to keep the Huns at bay. However, it was not long before the Sassanian kings attempted to end this humiliating status quo. The reactions of the three world powers to the Hunnic challenge will be analysed in the following chapter.

Notes

- 1 La Vaissière (2005), 11–15. See also Pulleyblank's identification of the name Xiongnu with Hun on the basis of phonetical similarities (2000a), 60–1. For further evidence in favour of this identification see de Crespigny (1984), 174; Wright (1997); Hill (2009), 73–4; Kim (2013), 27–8.
- 2 For full details see Henning (1948), 601–15.
- 3 For greater discussion of these sources see Kim (2015), 37–9, 45–6.
- 4 For excellent summaries of Xiongnu history see Barfield (1989), 32–84, and Yü (1990), 118–50.
- 5 Brosseder and Miller (2011b), 22.
- 6 For details on these settlements and their fortifications, buildings etc. see Danilov (2011), 129–36.
- 7 Brosseder and Miller (2011b), 25.
- 8 Pulleyblank (2000a), 64.
- 9 de Crespigny (1984), 178.
- 10 Christian (1998), 194.
- 11 Brosseder and Miller (2011a), 20.
- 12 Barfield (1981), 48–9.
- 13 Kürsat-Ahlers (1994), 289–90, argues for a Xiongnu bureaucracy in the form of a military organisation.
- 14 Christian (1998), 194.
- 15 Di Cosmo (2011), 44–5.
- 16 For a detailed discussion of the *heqin* policy see Chin (2010).
- 17 25 emperors were set up by the armies in 47 years! See Brown (1971), 24. See Williams (1985), 15–23.
- 18 See Demougeot (1979), 463–4; Bell-Fialkoff (2000), 126; Todd (1992), 150–2; Schutz (2000), 14–17; Kazanski (1991), 32–3.
- 19 Brown (1971), 22.
- 20 For a detailed narrative of the 3rd century crisis see Potter (2004), 215–75.
- 21 Heather (2006), 63–4, suggests an increase by at least a third of Roman military manpower in the late third to mid-4th century, from 300,000 to anywhere between 400,000 to 600,000 men. Goldsworthy (2009), 289, thinks otherwise. At the very least the army had certainly not shrunk in size. See Wickham (2009), 9, for further discussion.
- 22 Halsall (2007), 74–7. This build-up of the bureaucracy/administrative reforms, which of course meant more taxes for the average Roman, has at times been regarded as one of the root causes of internal decay, population decline and military collapse. However, as Heather (2006), 118–19, convincingly shows the population of the empire was actually increasing in the 4th century and the rural economy was also flourishing at the same time.
- 23 Matthews (1989), 253.
- 24 Kelly (2004), 1, 7, 192–3.
- 25 The increase in size of the Roman army and the re-organisation of the Roman army in the late 3rd century is regarded by Brown (1971), 25, as 'one of the finest achievements of Roman statecraft'.
- 26 Campbell (1999), 234.
- 27 Cameron (1993), 84, 94, 99, 103.
- 28 The rise of the Nazi party in Germany in the 1920s and 30s was aided by the hysteria among right-wing elites toward the success of what they called 'Jewish' Bolshevism in Russia that led to the creation of the Soviet Union. The Soviets brought to Europe a new political ideology, Leninism-Stalinism. Similarly, the Huns also introduced into Europe a new political system, 'feudalism'. For greater discussion see Kim (2013), 143–55. Geopolitically, the rise of the Huns in Europe in Late Antiquity is thus in

- many ways analogous to the rise of the Soviet Union in the 20th century. Both geopolitical revolutions triggered their own 'Germanic' crises in Europe.
- 29 During the days of the early empire commanders and generals of armies had been for the most part civilians holding temporary commissions. They were in reality amateurs who rarely had enough military experience, see Jones (1964), vol.2, 1037.
 - 30 Williams (1985), 97. A minimum of 14 new legions were raised by Diocletian in addition to the restoration of pre-existing legions.
 - 31 Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 7.5. John Lydus, *De Mensibus* 1.27, gives a total of 389,704 men in the army under Diocletian and 45,562 in the navy. Agathias, *Hist.* 13.7–8, gives the inflated number of 645,000. See also Whitby (2000a), 292, for estimates of the size of the army. See also Boak (1955), 87–9, for a rough estimate of 400,000 men in total throughout the whole empire. Halsall (2007), 144–5, also agrees.
 - 32 Lenski (2002), 372. Ferrill (1986), 22, has argued that at the beginning of the 5th century AD the Western Roman Army still numbered in excess of 200,000 men. As Boak (1955), 100, rightly points out, a much smaller number of troops were of any real value to the Romans in reality (Boak's picture of critical manpower shortages in the Western Roman Empire, however, only seems to be plausible for the 5th century and not the previous 4th). Population decline in the Roman Empire, perhaps a reality in the western half (exacerbated perhaps by a combination of factors including over-taxation by the imperial government in order to support the military efforts to counter the inroads of the barbarians, which in turn drove some peasants into poverty) was still in most areas not catastrophic, see Jones (1964), vol. 2, 1040–5. The Western Roman army at least in the late 4th century AD, especially the army in Gaul, was in fairly good condition. It was competent enough to repel most barbarian incursions. Roman military power both in the Eastern Empire and the Western Empire was by no means in irreversible decline in the late 4th century or even in the early 5th century AD. See also Demougeot (1979), 180–2, and Jones (1964), vol. 2, 682–6.
 - 33 Until the second decade of this century James Howard-Johnston was virtually the only major historian to reject outright this erroneous view.
 - 34 Heather (1995a) famously argued that the 'Hunnic revolution' was the indirect strategic cause for the fall of the West, but even he (from whose scholarship I have benefited considerably) attributes only a subsidiary role to the Huns in the process and views Hunnic expansion primarily from the perspective of the Goths and other Germanic tribes. In the minds of most other scholars the Huns were in no way part of the process that led to the transformation of the Western world.
 - 35 The author is no fan of either the Soviet Union or its ghastly communist totalitarian system. This is merely a recognition of the geopolitical significance of the Soviet Red Empire.
 - 36 Bona (1991), 41; Haussig (2000), 257; Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 9–15; King (1987), 77–95. Maenchen-Helfen, despite his deep reservations about the accuracy of Ammianus' description of the Huns, was still prepared to concede a degree of relevance to and acknowledge some historically valid information in Ammianus. This is rightly rejected by King and the validity of King's argument will be shown below.
 - 37 Thompson (1948), 6–8; Heather (2009), 215–16; Halsall (2007), 171–2; and Matthews (1989), 332–42, 353. All these great scholars to varying degrees accept the essential accuracy of Ammianus' portrait of the Huns. This is unfortunate and is due to the neglect of highly informative comparative research on Central Asian history and archaeology, which clearly shows that the Huns were a politically and culturally sophisticated people.
 - 38 Richter (1974), 343–77.
 - 39 For the abundant archaeological evidence for agriculture and farming in areas of Central Asia controlled by the Huns/ Xiongnu and other steppe pastoralists see Lubo-Lesnichenko (1989), 47; Minyaev (2001), 3; Mukhamedjanov (1994), 270, etc.
 - 40 Justin II, 11.

- 41 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 13–14.
- 42 Herodotus, who was a more conscientious ethnographer than Ammianus, interestingly does not make the ludicrous error of attributing no agriculture and political anarchy to his Scythians. He refers to farming Scythians (4.18) and in his discourse on the Scythians mentions the existence of a *nomarch* in each province of the Scythian kingdom (4.66). In Book 4.62.1 he also mentions the *nomes* of Scythia, which is the same word he uses to denote administrative units of Egypt and Persia.
- 43 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 15.
- 44 All archaeological discoveries from Hunnic tombs have yielded iron arrowheads, not bones. See Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 13. In fact, earlier Roman writers compliment the excellent quality of the arms produced by Central Asian ‘nomads’. Quintus Curtius Rufus (4.9.3) makes reference to coats of mail (of course made of iron) and Arrian (3.13.4) was impressed by the Central Asian cataphract horsemen carefully covered with coats of mail and armed with various iron weaponry.
- 45 Hambis (1958), 262; Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 330–1; La Vassière (2005), 17; Bona (1991), 140; Erdy (1995), 5–94.
- 46 Heather (2009), 215–16; Halsall (2007), 171–2.
- 47 I must refer the reader here to my book on the Huns (Kim 2013). What follows is a loose summary of the arguments presented in the book.
- 48 Kradin (2005), 154.
- 49 Kradin (2005), 155.
- 50 Exactly the same structure is found also in the Turkish Khaganate that replaced the Rouran Khaganate in the mid-6th century AD and also among the later Khazars who controlled southern Russia and the Ukraine from the 7th to the 10th centuries AD as successors of the Western Turks, see Findley (2005), 43, 50.
- 51 See the anecdotes concerning Modu’s punishment of the slightest infringements among his followers in *Shiji* 110.2888.
- 52 See Kradin (2005), 162 and also Kollautz and Miyakawa (1970), 63, 89.
- 53 Kollautz and Miyakawa (1970), 89. Imperial governors in the succeeding Turkish Ashina dynasty that replaced the Rouran also consisted entirely of members of the ruling dynasty. These governors were allocated ‘fiefs’ in the familiar appanage system which we find in the preceding Xiongnu and Rouran Empires. See Findley (2005), 44–5.
- 54 Kradin (2005), 162.
- 55 A similar system of succession is also noted among the later Turkic Pechenegs in the Pontic steppe. According to Constantine Porphyrogenitus the Pecheneg kings had no right to determine the succession, which usually resulted in collateral succession within the same royal clan. No one, however, could succeed from outside the royal family to the throne. See Khazanov (1984), 179 and Golden (1992), 11.
- 56 The Turks who replaced the Rouran as masters of their former empire would also adopt exactly the same policy towards their subjects and appointed members of the ruling Ashina clan as rulers or governors of important tribes, e.g. the Basmils. See Golden (1992), 142–3, 146.
- 57 Kradin (2003), 80, points out correctly that the political structure of the nomadic steppe empire and the militarisation of the entire population, which was its distinctive feature, could frequently lead to insurrection and desertion among disaffected tribes who enjoyed a degree of internal autonomy under the hegemony of the ruling tribe. Proximity to an agrarian, sedentary civilisation which could finance such revolts or desertions and accommodate runaway fugitives from the steppe empire could exacerbate tensions within it. In the earlier Xiongnu Empire there were also cases of desertions of tribes who fled West to escape Xiongnu rule, e.g. the Yuezhi who fled into Bactria (*Han Shu* 96A: 14b–15a) and the Wusun into Kazakhstan (*Shiji* 123:9a–10a). Political dissidents also fled to Han China like the Hun-yeh king who defected with his entire tribe in 121 BC (*Shiji* 123: 9b–10a). See Barfield (1981),

- 49–50. It is also in such a context that we should interpret the saga of Radagaisus and also probably the Alans of 405–6 AD, who departed the Danubian Plain for Roman territory, away from Hunnic domination.
- 58 Kwanten (1979), 19–20.
- 59 His name incidentally is the same as that of the 6th century near contemporary Utigur Hunnic king Anagai in the Pontic steppe, Menander Protector, fr. 19.1, Blockley (1985), 172.
- 60 Kradin (2005), 163.
- 61 Priscus, fr. 11.2, Blockley (1983), 279. Earlier in the 4th century Aurelius Victor (*Epit.* 47, 3 (ed. Pichlmayr *BT*, p. 173)), Alemany (2000), 42, calls the Huns and the Alans the worst of all evils and ‘*extremum periculum*’ to the name of Rome.
- 62 Priscus, fr. 11.2, Blockley (1983), 279. The discovery of Hunnic cauldrons along the Kama river and Attila’s gift of furs to visiting ambassadors, according to Christian (1998), 229, suggest that the Hunnic tributary system reached deep into even the forest region of Western Russia beyond the Pontic steppe. The presence of Hunnic princely graves, all identifiable by distinctive Hunnic artefacts such as the golden bow (an insignia of rank among the Huns), dating to the early 5th century AD across a vast area stretching from the Rhine to areas east of the Dnieper provides archaeological evidence for Hunnic imperial rule over most of Central and Eastern Europe, see Sulimirski (1970), 191–3.
- 63 Gordon (1960), 202; Blockley (1983), 386.
- 64 Priscus, fr. 11.2, Blockley (1983), 277.
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 Priscus, fr. 11.2, Blockley (1983), 279.
- 67 *Ibid.* Another contemporary source, the anonymous Gallic chronicler of 452, was also equally conscious of the magnitude of the danger to the Empire posed by the Huns. See Muhlberger (1990), 183. As Stickler (2007), 502–3, accurately points out, the Huns posed a mortal threat to the Roman Empire precisely because they rejected any prospect of integration into the military or civil structure of the Roman Empire and offered the barbarian tribes beyond Rome’s borders an alternative to Roman hegemony. In other words they enforced a separation between the Germanic tribes and the Romans and denied the Western Romans in particular their key areas of mercenary recruitment. This served to undermine the military power of the West in times of crises.
- 68 Priscus, fr. 11.1, Blockley (1983), 245. More on this shortly.
- 69 See Thompson (1996), 179–200, for an extended discussion.
- 70 Altheim (1959), vol. 4, 284, argues that Onegesius is a Hellenised Hunnic name, Old Turkish *on-iyiz*. Onegesius was, he argues, more likely to have been a Hun, not a Roman defector. The name of Onegesius’ brother Skottas, who if Onegesius is a Hun should likewise be a Hun, is presumed to be Gothic in origin, which tells us that ethnicity and names do not often go hand in hand. What is even more interesting is the suggestion (Altheim and Stiehl (1954), 259) that this name means ‘der zehn zur Gefolgschaft hat’, i.e. it is a reference to his position as a commander in the army organised in the typical steppe decimal system.
- 71 Priscus, fr. 13.1, fr. 11.2, Blockley (1983), 285, 259, 265–7, 241–3. See also Whitby (2000c), 705, for information.
- 72 Whitby (2000c), 711.
- 73 Olympiodorus fr. 19 (*Bibl. Cod.* 80, 173), Blockley (1983), 182.
- 74 Marcellinus Comes 444–5.1, Croke (1995), 18, 87. More on this later.
- 75 Priscus, fr. 11.2, Blockley (1983), 258.
- 76 *Ibid.*
- 77 Burns (1984), 46–7, 189, comments correctly that the Huns built up a governmental apparatus that unlike the earlier Germanic confederacies in the West and even the Greutung confederacy of the Goths, resulted in a tighter political command structure,

- precise ranks among government officials and allocation of clearly defined roles to conquered peoples.
- 78 Priscus fr. 25 (Jordanes *Get.* 50, 259–63), Blockley (1983), 319–21.
- 79 Probably a title and not a personal name. A Germanicised Hunnic name says Bona (1991), 63.
- 80 Burgess (2001b), 97; Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 388.
- 81 Bona (1991), 63.
- 82 Findley (2005), 33.
- 83 *Getica* 35.180, ‘germani **Octar et Roas**, qui ante Attilam regnum tenuisse narrantur’. See Croke (1977), 353 and Bona (1991), 50.
- 84 Sinor (1990a), 188. The rise to power of the sons of Mundzuk, the brother of Rua and Oktar, who may have died early, was obviously not without problems. Bleda and then Attila would continue to demand the return of royal fugitives in their dealings with the Romans before and after Bleda’s murder. See Croke (1981), 160, 164.
- 85 Priscus, fr.21.1 (*Chro. Pasch.* 587f), Blockley (1983), 308. See also Malalas 19, 5–12, Lakatos, *Quellenbuch* 55, Pohl (1980), 247. An indication perhaps that he had ruled mainly the western Germanic tribes centred on a Gepid core before he usurped the role of supreme king of the Hunnic state from Bleda. This would explain the prominence of Ardaric and his Gepids during his reign and also in the succession crisis after his death. Even after overthrowing Hunnic hegemony the Gepids retained the system of dual kingship.
- 86 Altheim (1948), 28 sees the title *praecipuus rex* as a translation of an Oghuric Turkic title for emperor *aniliki* (equivalent of the Rouran/Avar Khagan) found in the Schumen inscription of the Danubian Bulgars.
- 87 Priscus fr. 24, Blockley (1983), 318.
- 88 See Golden (1992), 103, for a discussion on the Bulgar prince list that has Attila and Ernak as the founding ancestors.
- 89 Priscus, fr. 13, Blockley (1983), 284. Again indicative of the Hunnic practice of distributing ‘fiefs’ to royal family members and top ranking nobles.
- 90 Thompson (1996), 181. See also Demougeot (1979), 533, 541–2.
- 91 For information on similar functions (diplomatic missions and military assignments) performed by Xiongnu governors/sub-kings dispatched by the central government see Pritsak (1954b), 194.
- 92 Priscus fr. 11, Blockley (1983), 258.
- 93 Priscus fr. 11, Blockley (1983), 244. Thompson (1996), 183. Revealingly, the name of one of Ernak’s kinsmen Emmedzur is, according to Altheim (1959), vol. 1, 27, a Latinised corruption of a formal Hunnic title *ämäcur* which means horse lord. This almost exactly matches the title given to the governors of the Xiongnu Empire, Ten Thousand Horsemen.
- 94 Thompson (1996), 182. See also Altheim (1959), vol. 4, 281–3.
- 95 Priscus fr. 13; 14, Blockley (1983), 284, 290. That these *logades* were not random selection of men but are identical with the ranked officials of a traditional steppe empire such as the Xiongnu and the Rouran is confirmed by the later Byzantine use of the same term to describe graded officials within the Avar Empire that succeeded the Huns, see Pohl (1988), 186.
- 96 Thompson (1996), 182.
- 97 Chelchal the Hun later during Dengizich’s invasion of the Roman Empire in the late 460s described these Hunnic collection of taxes (tribute) from the Goths, which caused discontent among the Goths in the Hunnic army, Priscus fr. 49, Blockley (1983), 356.
- 98 Thompson (1996), 197.
- 99 Referred to as tribe in Agathias 5.11.2, Frendo (1975), 146. It is probably a reference not to a specific tribe, but to tribes led by the six lords. See Altheim (1959), vol. 1, 27.
- 100 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae*, 2.47. See also Haussig (2000), 277.

- 101 Pritsak (1954a), 379.
- 102 Wolfram (1988), 75.
- 103 Enoki (1959), 24, probably correctly connects them to the Hun-na-sha (king of the Huns) state/dynasty, who, according to Chinese sources, controlled Sogdia in the late 4th and early 5th centuries AD. See also Frye (1975), 38 and Bivar (1983), 211 on the Chionites.
- 104 See Reza khani (2017).
- 105 Ammianus Marcellinus 16.9.3–4; 19.1.7.
- 106 Payne (2016), 8.
- 107 Payne (2015), 284.
- 108 Wright (1997), 96; Pulleyblank (2000b), 93.
- 109 See Pulleyblank (2000b), 91–2.
- 110 Érdy (1995), 21.
- 111 For the best analysis of these sources see La Vaissière (2015), 188.
- 112 Hunnic archaeological remains have been found in the Altai region from the 1st century AD onwards. See Pritsak (1954c), 243. The *Weilüe* (*Sanguozhi* 30.863–864) allocates the neighbouring Zhetysu region in the 3rd century AD to the Wusun, and the area to the west of the Zhetysu and north of the Kangju to the Turkic Dingling. The Wusun and the Kangju are said to have neither expanded nor shrunk since Han times.
- 113 Pulleyblank (2000b), 92.
- 114 Biswas (1973), 26; Pulleyblank (2000b), 93. For the contention that these Black Huns were the European Huns see Czeglédý (1983), 77.
- 115 Pulleyblank (2000b), 92; La Vaissière (2015), 185. See Theophanes 446, 21, Moravcsik (1958), vol. 2, 158–9. Dani, Litvinsky and Zamir Safi (1996), 169, identify the Hara (Kara) Huns with the Kermichiones.
- 116 Procopius 1.3.2–7.
- 117 Kollautz and Miyakawa (1970), 98.
- 118 Czeglédý (1983), 78.
- 119 Grenet (2002), 212.
- 120 Dani, Litvinsky and Zamir Safi (1996), 172–3.

3 The superpower reaction

3.1 China strikes back

As we have observed in the previous chapter, in the face of the unprecedented challenge by a military power more formidable than China itself, the Han dynasty adopted the practical policy of retrenchment and appeasement in order to buy time and to consolidate. While many argued that this policy had been a success and deserved to be maintained for the foreseeable future, Emperor Wu (the ‘martial’ emperor), who succeeded to the Han throne in 141 BC, decided that the continuation of tribute to the Xiongnu was no longer a tolerable situation. The emperor reversed the so-called *heqin* (appeasement) policy and authorised a plan in 134 BC to trap Gunchen Chanyu and the Xiongnu army in an ambush.

The plan predictably failed, however, and the emperor would face five years later in 129 BC a full-scale war with the Xiongnu that would continue unabated until the end of his reign and beyond. Sima Qian, the contemporary Han historian, who was hostile to the belligerent policies of the emperor and favoured the continuation of the *heqin* policy of emperor Wen (Emperor Wu’s grandfather), presents the war against the Xiongnu as a costly economic debacle which sapped the empire’s precious resources and resulted in mere pyrrhic victories for the emperor’s armies that suffered huge losses in manpower.¹ Whether this is a fair assessment is highly disputable. During the reign of Emperor Wu, the Han did score some impressive gains vis-à-vis the Xiongnu that led to the recovery of territory lost to the Xiongnu a century earlier. The Ordos region was cleared of Xiongnu forces and later the Gansu region was also added to the empire.

The successes of Han troops in the field were to some extent helped by internal political disturbances within the Xiongnu Empire. When the above-mentioned Gunchen Chanyu died in 126 BC in the early stages of the war, Ichise, the Chanyu’s brother, usurped the throne from Gunchen’s designated heir, the wise king of the left Yui Bi. Yui Bi, after being defeated in the war of succession, surrendered to the Han. The illegal power grab by Ichise Chanyu brought about other repercussions. Xiongnu sub-kings in the Gansu region, like Yui Bi before them, chose to defect to Han China after being defeated by invading Han armies rather than returning to the Xiongnu court to face punishment at the hands of Ichise Chanyu. We see here a full reversal of previous history during the earlier reigns of

Modu Chanyu and Han Gaozu when Han sub-kings defected to the Xiongnu with ever-growing frequency. Clearly the balance of power had shifted in the Han's favour. It was evident that Emperor Wu's militant policy of aggression towards the Xiongnu was beginning to bear fruit. Han military victories were encouraging disaffected Xiongnu nobles to seek an alternative: changing sides (something that would have been unthinkable when the Xiongnu were treated as the hegemonic power under the previous *heqin* system of engagement). It is true that internal unrest within the Xiongnu realm greatly facilitated these Han victories. However, if it wasn't for the hard-line posturing of Emperor Wu, arguably these internal Xiongnu disturbances would never have resulted in Han gains.

The emperor had successfully challenged Xiongnu hegemony and created a new geopolitical situation more favourable to China. Han intransigence and refusal to negotiate on terms of parity with the Xiongnu led to continued warfare between the two empires, a hegemonic war which persisted until 60 BC. However, although there were severe economic consequences for China, the Han progressively routed the Xiongnu and secured control over all of the Tarim Basin (modern day Xinjiang). The string of defeats suffered by the Xiongnu also damaged their prestige among steppe nations and triggered rebellion against Xiongnu rule among former vassal peoples such as the Wusun. In 72 BC the Wusun in alliance with China mounted a highly successful raid against the Xiongnu and the following year in 71 BC the Dingling to the north and the Wuhuan to the east (both former Xiongnu subjects), joined the coalition and began assaulting the Xiongnu from all sides.

The policy of first appeasement to buy time and then renewed confrontation thus resulted in a resounding geopolitical success for China. True, the Han Empire was able to implement this policy not just due to their own diplomatic finesse, but also were aided by the Xiongnu unwillingness to annex core Han territories during the earlier reign of Modu Chanyu, when the Xiongnu clearly overpowered the Han. This Xiongnu political tradition of rendering tributary rather than annexing large and more distant territorial entities backfired on the Xiongnu when their own military edge over the Han diminished (a phenomenon which we will encounter later also in the Roman and Persian contexts). Yet, it was the strategic flexibility and wise policies of Han geostrategists and policymakers that enabled the Han to effectively exploit this Xiongnu practice to China's advantage and then eventually to accumulate enough resources to turn the tables on the Xiongnu during the reign of Emperor Wu. In the case of China, biding one's time and retrenching to consolidate core interests, later paid great dividends.

The Xiongnu were outplayed geopolitically by their Han adversaries and internal instability followed external reverses. Between 114 BC and 58 BC the Xiongnu enthroned a total of eight short-lived Chanyus, of whom only two reigned for more than ten years. Conflict over the imperial succession, sometimes triggered by regional power struggles, seriously undermined the ability of the Xiongnu court to suppress internal rebellions and effectively counter Han expansion. By 57 BC as many as five regional contenders, all claimed the title of Chanyu. Three years later in 54 BC just two of the five contenders remained, Zhizhi in the north

and Huhanye in the south. Huhanye, in order to defeat his northern rival, submitted to the Chinese emperor and became a Han vassal. He went so far as to pay homage to the Han emperor in Changan and was able to defeat Zhizhi with Han money and military support. The Han thus orchestrated a successful geopolitical revolution, overthrowing the Xiongnu hegemony and replacing it with the Sinocentric world order.

There would be a brief period of Xiongnu resurgence 40 years later when the Han dynasty was displaced by the short-lived Xin dynasty of the usurper Wang Mang. As civil war tore apart the Chinese Empire the Xiongnu used the respite to subdue the Wuhuan to the east and reconquered lost territories to the west, most notably the Tarim Basin. Yet, this proved to be temporary as another round of succession struggle over the imperial throne split the Xiongnu, this time permanently, into two halves. In 46 AD Punu was enthroned by the northern Xiongnu, but in the south eight breakaway tribes asserted the rights of another claimant Bi. In 50 AD Bi tried to mimic the strategy of Huhanye and elicited aid from the restored Han dynasty, sending his son to Luoyang, the new Chinese capital, to signal his willingness to become a Han vassal.

What in fact happened was the opposite of Bi's hopes. He was forced to settle his Southern Xiongnu in Chinese territory as Han frontier guards, while the Northern Xiongnu were subjected to devastating Han raids designed to obliterate the Xiongnu as a geopolitical entity.

In 73–4 AD the Chinese retook the Tarim Basin and other western territories from the Northern Xiongnu. The Dingling tribes to the north of the Xiongnu rose up in rebellion against their Xiongnu masters and the anti-Xiongnu coalition was joined by the formidable Xianbei to the East (another formerly Xiongnu vassal horde). The stage was set for the destruction of the Xiongnu in Mongolia. In 87 AD the Xianbei defeated and killed the reigning Xiongnu Chanyu. In order to avenge their past humiliation at the hands of the Xiongnu the Xianbei flayed the body of the dead Xiongnu ruler. Fifty-eight Xiongnu tribes then surrendered to the Han Empire. The Han did not allow the Southern Xiongnu to advance and capture the domains of the Northern Xiongnu. Instead in 89 AD the Chinese general Dou Xian invaded Mongolia and killed 13,000 Northern Xiongnu soldiers and many high-ranking nobles. In the aftermath of that disaster 81 Xiongnu tribes consisting of 200,000 people are said to have deserted the Northern Xiongnu and switched sides. Just two years later in 91 AD another crippling defeat in the southern range of the Altai Mountains finished the Northern Xiongnu as an imperial power in East Asia. The Han was triumphant, while the Xiongnu, now languishing in the Altai region (the Northern Xiongnu) and subdued in the Ordos area (the Southern Xiongnu), would have to bide their time until a renaissance of their fortunes occurred in the 4th century AD.²

3.2 Rome falters

The arrival of the Huns in Europe in the 370s AD was a veritable revolution in the geopolitical landscape of the region and would eventually have fatal consequences

for the Roman Empire, which, unlike the Chinese of the Han dynasty, due to unfamiliarity with the Hunnic threat (its magnitude, capacity and nature) failed to apply a consistent and workable geostrategy to effectively manage its Hunnic problem.³ Initially the Romans had little direct contact with the Huns. The Hunnic centre of power well into the 5th century AD was in Southern Russia and the Ukraine. Only an advance guard of Huns were operating along the Danube in the 370s AD.⁴ According to the late 5th and early 6th century AD Roman historian Zosimus, in the year 381/2 AD the Sciri and Carpodacians made a raid into Roman territory south of the Danube. This incursion may have been directed by the Huns, making this the very first Hunnic military collision with the Romans.⁵ The fact that the majority of the Hunnic army in the region consisted of troops levied from newly conquered peoples indicates that only a few Huns were present in the region and the main Huns were further to the east.

In 384 AD, according to the Roman bishop Ambrose, a contingent of Huns together with some Alans invaded the territory of the Suebic Juthungi, a Germanic tribal group who had been causing trouble for the Romans in the province of Raetia. This incursion was apparently conducted at the request and urging of the Romans. The Huns after dealing with these new victims, then advanced in the direction of Gaul. The Roman emperor Valentinian, however, managed to persuade them to turn back and attack the Germanic Alamanni instead.⁶ The relations between the Huns and the Romans it seems at this stage was *ad hoc*, with the Romans attempting to deal with the Huns as they had traditionally dealt earlier with other barbarian tribes to the north (and discovering to their consternation that the Huns operated by their own rules and refused to play along). Roman provinces were just as much a target of Hunnic aggression as the barbarians whom Rome thought they had hired the Huns to attack. It was evident that Rome lacked a clear geostrategy to deal with the Huns and this lack of clarity and uniformity in Roman policy initiatives vis-à-vis the Huns would become a serious problem for the Romans later.

That the Huns were now a threat to the Romans and not just the Germanic tribes beyond Rome's borders was manifestly clear. Thompson suggests that the Huns may have conquered Eastern Pannonia (roughly western parts of modern Hungary) during this time from the Romans.⁷ The consolidation of Hunnic rule along the Danube also meant in practice the stabilisation of Rome's Danubian frontier regions, as the Germanic tribes now under Hunnic rule could not constantly raid Roman territory as before. Alarming, this furthermore implied that the empire 'no longer had any control over the dispositions to the north of the Danube'.⁸ A group of Goths under a certain Odotheus did attempt to break into Roman territory in 386 AD. However, this was quickly halted and there were no serious incursions by Germanic tribesmen again until the beginning of the next century almost two decades later.

The obvious solution to the new threat posed by the Huns was the Chinese approach, which we have examined previously: a treaty that worked out a *modus vivendi* between the two powers, which conceded to the Huns *de jure* Roman recognition of their already *de facto* hegemony over all territory north of the Danube

coupled with symbolic items of tribute to the Huns from the Romans and a promise of non-interference in Hunnic internal affairs in return for Hunnic military aid against Rome's other enemies. This was a perfectly workable and working model for the Romans and the Huns alike. The Romans in fact periodically adopted this approach. However, as we shall see below, the lack of consistency on the part of the Romans in pursuing this policy ultimately denied them a similar success as that enjoyed by the Chinese geostrategy mentioned earlier.

The Romans initially had no comprehension of what they were facing. This is evident from the ludicrous picture of the Hunnic polity left by the contemporary Roman historian Ammianus. He envisaged just another fierce and disorganised rabble of barbarian warriors who were to be dealt with in a similar manner to any other barbarian group Rome had faced earlier. The rude wake-up call came in 395 AD: the empire was facing another empire and not a small barbarian confederation like the Goths, Suebi and the Franks. In that year the Huns organised a gigantic invasion of both the Roman and Persian Empires. The main eastern wing of the Huns launched a major offensive through the Caucasus devastating both northern Persia and also the eastern provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire. The western wing of the Huns at the same time invaded the Balkan provinces.⁹ The enormous scale and exceptional coordination of these invasions, profoundly shocked the Romans. Terrified Romans such as Saint Jerome and Ephraim the Syrian¹⁰ declared that the Huns were the reincarnation of the devil, Gog and Magog, and that the end of times was near.

Something needed to be done to ameliorate this situation. The Romans belatedly turned to negotiations. The first Hunnic king they encountered was a figure called Uldin. Uldin was a Hunnic sub-king (a *regulus*) whose fief in the early 5th century AD was situated along the Danube. His name gives us a possible hint as to his position within the Hunnic hierarchy. The *-in/-is* suffix of his recorded name is a Greek suffix added to his proper name. Therefore, his Hunnic name was most likely a variant of Uld/Ulti, which is probably a Greco-Roman corruption of the common Turkic word for the number six, *altı* (we see the same phenomenon in the case of the Hunnic term *oultizouroi*=*alt-i-cur* (the six lord), cf. another transliteration *altziagiri*, which is closer to the original). The Xiongnu Huns in Inner Asia and also the Bulgars who succeeded the Huns in Europe both had a top-ranking aristocratic council/group of six sub-kings. Uldin was probably one of these six sub-kings specifically in charge of the western border territories of the Hunnic realm along the Danube and in Pannonia contiguous with the Roman Empire, hence his management of diplomatic correspondence with the Romans. The main Huns, however, were still situated further east and a large portion of Uldin's army in the west consisted of recently subdued and understandably unwilling and unreliable Germanic forced levies, a vulnerability which the Romans would later deftly exploit. Uldin interestingly declared to the Romans the imperial ideology of his Inner Asian Empire. He boasted to the Roman ambassador that all lands under the sun belonged to him and the Huns. This was a claim to hegemony and the Romans would pay the consequences for dismissing this Hunnic claim as mere bravado.

The Romans, however, at this point still had some time to adapt to the situation and also some breathing space to cope militarily with the Hunnic threat. As described above, the Huns had not yet moved the bulk of their armies permanently west and Uldin's comparatively small, heterogeneous army along the Danube, though still imposing to the Romans, was not the virtually invincible war machine the Romans would encounter later. The Romans, therefore, once negotiations started did not immediately have to concede inferior status, despite Hunnic demands that the Romans do so. Complicating matters further was the lack of coordination in Hunnic policy between the two halves of the Roman Empire. It was the Western Empire that recognised first the benefits to be gained from peace and cooperation with the Huns. However, this initial advantage was squandered by the power struggle within the Western Empire between the nominal ruler (the reigning emperor) and the *de facto* ruler behind the throne, the strongman Stilicho. The clash in policy between the military leader of the empire and the nominal authorities would frequently deter the timely and consistent implementation of a cohesive Roman policy *vis-à-vis* the Huns.

The first indication that the rapprochement with the Huns was an effective means of border control for the Romans came in 405 AD when a certain Radagaisus led an exodus of renegade Goths from Hunnic territory into Italy.¹¹ Uldin in fulfilment of his agreements with Stilicho reacted vigorously to this desertion. The Huns and Roman troops trapped the Goths and decimated them before they could do substantial damage to Roman possessions. The alliance also helped to deter the main enemy threatening Stilicho's position in Italy, King Alaric and his Visigoths (then languishing in the western Balkans). The Western Roman emperor Honorius and Stilicho employed an army of 10,000 Huns, presumably from Uldin, to check the advances of Alaric. That the Western Romans badly needed Hunnic aid to defend its borders was revealed the same year (405/6 AD) when a group of Alans led a migration of Vandals and Suebi across the Rhine into Gaul, defeating the Roman-allied Franks in the process.¹² These Alans, Vandals and Suebi were also likely escaping Hunnic domination and in order to stem any further flow of barbarians into Roman territory and also to eliminate barbarians who had already entered Roman lands (e.g. the Visigoths and Alans/Vandals) the imperial authorities needed Hunnic military muscle. The Huns for their part, who were seeking to consolidate their control over non-Roman Europe, needed the cooperation and recognition of the Romans to ensure that their subjects would not see the Romans as a viable alternative to Hunnic rule. It was thus a workable win-win formula. Yet, things quickly went drastically wrong for both sides.

Stilicho, who had been the architect of good relations with the Huns, was brutally murdered along with his Hunnic bodyguards (probably given to him by Uldin) by Sarus, another barbarian mercenary commander in Roman service. Uldin now switched his alliances in retaliation and gave military support to Alaric via Alaric's brother-in-law Athaulf. Now emboldened by support from Hunnic troops Alaric and his Goths invaded Italy in 408 AD, easily brushing aside remaining Roman forces. Rome itself was sacked and the foolishness of casting aside Stilicho's agreements with the Huns became evident. The inconsistent

Western Roman Hunnic policy thus brought about a disaster. If the alliance had been preserved the Visigothic menace would have been contained in the Balkans with Hunnic aid and the Goths would never have entered Gaul and Spain to create the Visigothic kingdom there. The punitive campaigns against the Alan-Vandals, who had erupted into Gaul, could also have been launched much earlier with Hunnic support, potentially ridding the empire of this threat before it resulted in the Vandal kingdom of North Africa. If this had happened, the Western Roman Empire would have been preserved largely intact in alliance with the Huns. The Romans of course would have had to pay tribute to the Huns and accept vassal status like the Chinese did to the Xiongnu, but that was a small price to pay for the preservation of their empire. If they waited patiently and bided their time, they would have seen internal problems emerging in the Hunnic Empire, which they in a later more favourable military and geopolitical situation could have exploited to their advantage (again compare with the policies of Wudi in Han China). Instead, the Western Roman Empire suffered a near irreparable blow at the hands of the Visigoths and lost the best opportunity it had to quickly halt the barbarian invasions.

The Eastern Roman Empire made its own policy errors that exacerbated this situation. The Eastern Roman state had one major advantage that its Western twin was denied: geography. Much of the Eastern Roman eastern frontier was closed to the Huns via the buffer of Sassanian Persia, thereby safeguarding the most productive and economically vibrant provinces of the Roman world from Hunnic depredations. When the Hunnic power centre shifted to central Europe in the 5th century, the danger of Hunnic invasions via Persia and the Caucasus also significantly diminished. The threat from Persia had also simultaneously been greatly reduced due to the Kidarite Hunnic invasions of Persia in the east. The geopolitical map of Western Eurasia thus favoured the Eastern Roman Empire. One other geographical feature also greatly favoured the Eastern Romans: the impregnable location of the imperial capital Constantinople, which could not be breached by land and could only be taken via a combined land and sea assault. Fortunately for the Romans the Huns lacked a navy and the Romans had full control of the Black Sea and the Aegean. This accident of geography thus allowed the Eastern Roman Empire to avoid the worst consequences of uncontrolled, mass barbarian influx/invasion: the establishment of independent barbarian kingdoms within its borders, a fate suffered by the West which lay exposed geographically. Only the relatively poorer Balkan provinces were devastated by Hunnic and Gothic incursions and those losses could be gradually remedied. What the absence of a sensible Hunnic policy cost the Eastern Romans was not their own demise, but the inability to aid their Western Roman counterparts when such aid was a vital necessity.

In contrast to the good relations between Uldin and Stilicho, Hunnic relations with the Eastern Roman Empire were decidedly more contentious and rocky. Uldin initially showed good will to Constantinople by delivering to Roman authorities ca. 400 AD the head of the rebel Gothic commander Gainas who had ended up in Hunnic hands. However, the Eastern Romans were slow to reciprocate and around the same time that Alaric and his Visigoths launched their famous Italian invasion in 408 AD Uldin in person led an ill-fated invasion of Eastern Roman territory.¹³

The invasion ended in failure, partially due to treachery among Uldin's own retainers and captains, who were incited to rebellion by Roman bribes. The weaknesses inherent in Uldin's army, mentioned above, finally caught up with Uldin. The lack of cohesion in the western Hunnic army was exploited to the maximum by the Romans and ward off the Hunnic onslaught this time round. However, the invasion of the Huns did have the effect of preventing any conceivable aid from the East reaching the West to prevent the ravaging of Italy. Furthermore, any military advantage the Romans had so far enjoyed vis-à-vis the Huns soon disappeared as the main Huns finally moved west and nullified any potential weakness the Huns had shown earlier.

The direct engagement of the main Huns in western affairs started to alarm the Romans. The first indication of this comes from Olympiodorus, an early 5th century Roman diplomat, who in the second decade of the 5th century (ca. 412 AD) visited the court of the principal king of the Huns, Karaton. Instead of a *regulus*/petty king like Uldin, the Romans now found themselves dealing with what Olympiodorus, a rarely available eyewitness of events within the Hunnic Empire, describes as the 'ὁτῶν ῥηγῶν πρῶτος' (the first of the kings).¹⁴ The Romans were forced to appease this more powerful Hunnic ruler with lavish gifts.

By the 420s AD the Romans learned that the high kingship of the Hunnic Empire had passed to two brothers, Ruga (sometimes also referred to as Rua or by the Gothified name Rugila) the supreme king who ruled in the East and Octar, his brother, who seems to have acted as his brother's deputy in the West. A pattern similar to the Uldin-Stilicho years now repeated itself. The Western Romans again in contrast to their eastern peers sought to restore a close working relationship with the Huns. The new Western Roman strongman Aetius, like Stilicho before him, won the favour of the two Hunnic kings, Ruga and Octar. With their continued military support Aetius was able to pursue both his own ambitions within the Roman Empire and also to punish in detail the barbarians who had snatched from the Romans much of the empire's western possessions. In 425 AD Aetius supposedly received an army of 60,000 (!) Huns from Ruga to support his candidate for Western Roman emperor, the usurper John, against the forces of Emperor Theodosius II.

We find the Huns continuing to support Aetius over a decade later even after the death of Ruga, his patron. Troops supplied by the Huns were instrumental in the capture of Tibatto, the troublesome leader of the Bagaudae (Roman rebels) in 437 AD. That same year, the Huns, possibly under the leadership of Attila, destroyed the menacing Burgundians in alliance with Aetius.¹⁵ In a separate deployment a small contingent of Huns had also been dispatched to aid the Roman general Litorius in relieving Narbonne (a city in southern France) from the Visigoths. Aetius would inflict another critical defeat on the Visigoths in 438 AD, again with Hunnic support. Aetius' alliance with the Huns had allowed the Western Romans to recover from the military disasters of the first quarter of the 5th century AD. Gaul was largely back under firm Roman control. The Visigoths, Alans, Burgundians and Franks as well as the rebel Bagaudae in Northern Gaul, had all by and large either been subdued or reduced to *foederati* status.

By 441 AD the military situation for both halves of the Roman Empire was more favourable than it had ever been in the 5th century. In that year both the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire were gathering forces for the annihilation of the troublesome Vandal-Alan kingdom in North Africa. The Vandals had deprived the Western Romans of their richest revenue generating province and the recovery of North Africa was a vital necessity if the Western Roman Empire was to have a viable future and reverse the barbarian tide. At this most critical juncture the inconsistency of Eastern Roman policies vis-à-vis the Huns finally came back to haunt both halves of the Roman Empire.

In contrast to the good relations between the Huns and Aetius, Hunnic relations with the Eastern Roman Empire had been fraught with difficulties. In 422 AD the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II, after suffering embarrassing military reverses at the hands of both the Huns and the Persians, had negotiated a sensible peace treaty with the Huns and promised to pay Ruga an annual tribute of 350 pounds of gold.¹⁶ However, the Eastern Romans failed to consistently abide by the terms of that treaty. In 434 AD Ruga dispatched his envoy, Esla, to Constantinople to demand the return of fugitive peoples from the Hunnic Empire, who had been granted asylum by the Romans. These were the Amilzuri, Itimari, Tunsures, Boisci and others. The refusal of the Romans to return these fugitives triggered a massive Hunnic invasion. Fortunately for the Romans Ruga seems to have suddenly died while campaigning in the Balkans and the issue of succession then preoccupied the Huns, giving the Romans a brief respite.

All this ended in 441 AD when the two new Hunnic kings, the famous brothers Bleda and Attila, invaded Rome's Balkan territories. In order to counter the Hunnic army and defend Constantinople the Romans had to recall the expeditionary army under Areobindus that had been sent to attack King Geiseric and his Vandals.¹⁷ A golden opportunity to tackle the Vandals was thus lost. By 442 AD the war drew to a close and the Romans ended hostilities by agreeing to pay an increased tribute to the Huns¹⁸ and by handing back Hunnic fugitives to kings Bleda and Attila. It would have been wise of the Romans to have scrupulously respected the terms of this treaty and not to intervene again in Hunnic internal affairs, regardless of minor Hunnic provocations (the Han Chinese approach in relation to the Xiongnu during the *heqin* period). However, the Romans again did not fully abide by the terms of the treaty and provided Attila with an excuse for launching a still greater and more devastating war in 447 AD.¹⁹

The war of 447 AD was an unmitigated disaster for the Romans.²⁰ The East Roman field army was for all intents and purposes completely wiped out. Only the portion of the Roman army under the Gothic commander Arnegisclus made any impression on Attila's forces, but they too were annihilated in a fierce engagement near the River Utus. Marcianople, the base of operations of the gallant Arnegisclus, was sacked and then the Huns trapped and destroyed the main Roman field army, presumably under the command of senior generals Aspar and Areobindus, at Chersonesus (Gallipoli). Theophanes, a Byzantine chronicler, concludes that all three generals were badly defeated and Attila advanced to 'both

seas', the Black Sea and the Hellespont. This forced the inept Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II to sue for terms.²¹

The price of directly challenging the Huns had been costly for the Roman Empire. The Gallic chronicle of 452 records that the Huns captured some 70 cities in the Balkans.²² Every city in Thrace was taken and sacked with the exception of Adrianople and Heracleia,²³ while Constantinople itself was gravely threatened. Hunnic raiding parties also penetrated deep into Greece as far as Thermopylae. The taking of walled cities by the invading Huns was the most shocking development. The previous invasions of the Goths and other barbarians had not caused serious damage to the empire's authority in the region because these peoples lacked the ability to quickly take fortified strongholds. In contrast the Huns with the apparatus and resources of an organised state brought with them the necessary siege equipment to breach Roman defences at will. So serious were the losses sustained by the Eastern Roman Empire that the Romans would not have enough military resources to fully reassert control over their devastated Balkan provinces for decades to come.²⁴ Marcellinus Comes, a 6th century AD chronicler, summed up the whole disaster in the following way:

*Ingens bellum et priore maius per Attilam regem nostris inflictum paene totam Europam excisis invasisque civitatibus atque castellis conrasit/ A mighty war, greater than the previous one, was brought upon us by King Attila. It devastated almost the whole of Europe and cities and forts were invaded and pillaged.*²⁵

Priscus tells us about the aftermath:

The Romans pretended that they had made the agreements (i.e. to increase payments of tribute) voluntarily, but because of the overwhelming fear which gripped their commanders they were compelled to accept gladly every injunction, however harsh, in their eagerness for peace.²⁶

The Romans were forced to pay 8,100 pounds of gold immediately to the Hunnic king personally and also to pay further unspecified sums to ransom the immense number of prisoners taken by the Huns. The Romans were even required to pay the ransoms for Roman prisoners who had already fled Hunnic territory and were no longer under Hunnic jurisdiction.²⁷ Even more damaging to Roman interests was another condition of the peace treaty: the surrender of a wide belt of territory south of the Danube stretching from Singidunum on the frontier of Pannonia to Novae, some 300 miles distance and five days' journey in depth, i.e. 100–120 miles. All of Dacia Ripensis and parts of three other Balkan provinces were thus ceded to the Huns.

Interestingly, the Huns had no real interest in holding on to Roman territory. The tribute they imposed on the defeated Romans was also surprisingly reasonable. What the Huns wanted was similar to what the Xiongnu had earlier demanded from the Chinese, Roman recognition of Hunnic overlordship and the

incorporation of a largely intact sedentary state (Rome) into the Hunnic tributary system as a vassal state. During the embassy of Anatolius and Nomus in 449 AD Attila seems to have indicated his willingness to return to the Romans the provinces seized by the Huns in the previous war. All this indicates that the Hunnic Empire was not really an existential threat to the Romans (something that the Romans feared). Not because the Huns lacked the ability to destroy the Roman state, but because in the typical Inner Asian manner they instinctively preferred to leave distant large territorial blocks autonomous as dependencies rather than annex them. The Romans by persistently trying to overcome the Huns via either war or subterfuge and constantly breaking treaties (in Hunnic eyes) that they had signed with the Huns (Theodosius' treaty with the Huns for instance was immediately revoked by his successor Marcian) destroyed any chances of a meaningful settlement and in the process the Romans found themselves in an untenable geopolitical situation.

The consequences, however, of this Eastern Roman strategic folly was, for the geographical reasons explained earlier, borne not primarily by the Eastern Roman Empire itself, but by the Western Roman Empire. Until the 440s AD Aetius, the Western Roman generalissimo, had played all his strategic cards correctly. He had appeased the Huns by functioning in effect as a vassal to the Hunnic kings. In return for this nominal allegiance, that did not cost him much, he received valuable military aid from the Huns, which enabled him to reassert Roman authority in Western Europe. However, he was then forced into a geo-strategic error not entirely of his own making. Aetius' power base was without question the military backing of his Hunnic patrons,²⁸ but he had another nominal suzerain, the Western Roman emperor. Like his Eastern Roman counterpart, the reigning Western Roman emperor Valentinian III had no grasp whatsoever of the geostrategic options available to him (or lack thereof). It certainly did not help the Western Romans that the ease with which the Eastern Romans had been defeated in 447 had made Attila contemptuous of Roman military capacity. The demands that came from Attila became more insolent and menacing as a result. Although the best course of action for Valentinian was to simply give in and pay an increased tribute (with the possible surrender of disputed frontier regions to the Huns), he foolishly chose to resist the Huns. Whereas in the case of the Eastern Romans defeat meant military impotence for several decades followed by a full revival of their imperial fortunes, for the West war with the Huns would precipitate its eventual collapse.

Why the Huns chose to invade the Western Roman Empire at this juncture has confused many historians in the past. The explanation given by our principal source on the conflict, the Gothic historian Jordanes, is so heavily distorted with the aim of glorifying the role played by the Visigoths during the conflict that we need to look elsewhere for a credible *casus belli*. Jordanes claims that the main aim of the Hunnic invasion was the elimination of the Visigothic kingdom of Toulouse, which is of course nonsense. Eastern Roman court gossip preserved in an unreliable fragment of Priscus,²⁹ is hardly any better, as it asserts that Attila decided to attack the Western Roman Empire to claim Honoria (the scandal

ridden, estranged sister of Valentinian III) as his wife and to attack the Goths as a favour to King Geiseric of the Vandals.

The real purpose of the campaign into Gaul and the intended target become more obvious in another more genuine fragment of Priscus. The fragment tells us that Attila and Aetius came to blows over the issue of the Frankish succession. The Franks had traditionally been the vassals of the Romans and Roman authority over the Franks residing west of the Rhine had been recognised by earlier Hunnic rulers. Yet in the late 440s AD Attila began meddling in the affairs of the Franks within the Roman sphere of influence and pushed a candidate for the Frankish throne that contradicted Aetius' choice. That all was not well in the decades old relationship between Aetius and the Huns is revealed by another development during this time.

When Aetius and his client king, Goar of the Alans, attacked the rebel Bagaudae ca. 448 AD Eudoxius, the rebel leader, chose to flee to the court of Attila in full knowledge that he would be welcomed there. Clearly the relations between the Hun king and Aetius were deteriorating fast. Why Attila would have chosen to destabilise the position of Aetius, who had for decades been a faithful Hunnic ally, is puzzling. One could assume that Aetius was a supporter of Bleda, the previous Hunnic king whom Attila displaced, and the absence of Hunnic military aid to Aetius after 445 AD (when Bleda was removed and Aetius was forced to rely more and more on the Alans and Visigoths), points to that possibility. Although Aetius had done nothing to necessarily provoke the Hunnic king, Attila was it seems attempting to stamp his authority in the west at the expense of Aetius, possibly in order to test the latter's loyalty to the new Hunnic regime.

The threatening language of Attila's envoys demanding submission from the Romans also kindled Roman fears, insulted Roman pride and turned public opinion in a direction that forced Aetius' hand. John Malalas and the Paschal Chronicle tell us that a Hunnic envoy told Valentinian III that Attila the Hun king was the lord and master of both himself and the Roman Emperors (!).³⁰ Priscus reports that the Romans saw Attila as aiming for or demanding the surrender of not just the Franks west of the Rhine, but also nothing less than half of the Western Roman Empire.³¹ As explained above, the Huns were not aiming to conquer the Romans, but were trying to force them into vassalage. Aetius probably understood this and he may have wished to cater to Hunnic demands. However, Valentinian and the Western Roman elite were not so far-sighted and demanded that he oppose the Hunnic threat. That Aetius was actually (and sensibly) lukewarm about fighting the Huns is revealed by a hostile tradition that claims that Aetius allowed the Huns to depart unmolested after the battle of Chalons because he wanted to renew his old alliance with them to counter the Visigoths.³²

Aetius rightly feared engaging the Huns in battle. He knew that even if he somehow prevailed, 'victory' over the Huns would mean the decimation of his troops and the dissolution of what remained of the Western Roman army (which he had over the past decades so painstakingly rebuilt with Hunnic aid). It would also mean the permanent state of hostility with the Huns thereafter, as he would be seen by Attila as a rebel and a traitor. He would thus lose his army,

any prospect of replenishing his depleted troops with reinforcements from the Huns, and, as a logical corollary to this, his position within the Western Roman Empire, which depended on his alliance with the Huns. Of course this is what eventually happened.

Aetius, for his part, tried his best to avoid battle and retreated before the advancing Hunnic army. He only gave chase when he learned that the Huns had begun to withdraw after the botched siege of Orléans where the Alans had offered fierce resistance against Hunnic besiegers. At this point it is likely that Aetius expected the Huns to leave without directly engaging his army in a pitched battle. He could then argue to his Roman detractors that he had beaten back the Huns (while suffering minimal to no losses) and at the same time negotiate with Attila on the grounds that as a faithful ally he had avoided doing him harm while he was campaigning in Gaul. However, unfortunately for Aetius Attila suddenly halted his army and turned around to face the pursuing Romans in a decisive battle. This was probably Attila's intention all along. The retreat was a feigned one (typical strategy of steppe armies) designed to lure the cautious Aetius into a confrontation.

The battle of Chalons that followed was a bloodbath, the results of which are unclear. Most historians argue that the Huns were defeated, but the most accurate assessment of the results come from Prosper, a contemporary, who noted that the slaughter was incalculable-for neither side gave way-and '*it appears that the Huns were defeated* in this battle because those among them that survived lost their taste for fighting and *turned back home*'.³³ Regardless of who had actually won the battle (in the opinion of the author of this book clearly the Huns, since they had possession of the battlefield after the battle when Aetius and the Visigoths retreated), the consequences are indisputable: the virtual annihilation of what was left of the Western Roman military establishment.

After this battle Aetius could no longer maintain his control over the Western Roman Empire. The Huns seemingly unfazed by the casualties they had sustained in Gaul, invaded Italy the following year. Only the payment of tribute from Pope Leo and a possible outbreak of plague deterred the Huns from marching on Rome and sacking the city. Aetius and the hapless Valentinian in Ravenna could do nothing but watch as the Huns ravaged what was left of the Western Roman Empire and its economic resources. The Western Roman army never recovered from the war against Attila. From this point on it degenerated into a series of hired mercenary forces commanded by clearly un-Romanised, unintegrated barbarian kings/chiefs and their retainers, who were in no way completely dependent on or even remotely loyal to the imperial government and the Roman state. The Eastern Romans who alone could have aided the West in this situation were also in no shape to mount a substantial military campaign in western Europe. They were crippled militarily for decades by the Hunnic War of 447. In the end the Western Roman state unable to rebuild its military forces and deprived of sufficient aid from either the Huns or the Eastern Roman Empire dissolved into a motley collection of barbarian kingdoms. What was left of it was overthrown in 476 AD by a warlord of Hunnic origin, Odoacer, the son of Edeco (one of Attila's logades),

who commanded the 'Roman' army in Italy, which was by then in reality a coalition of ex-Hunnic troops (Torcilingi, Rogi, Heruls and Sciri, who had been hired by the Romans to defend Italy from other barbarian forces).³⁴

To recap, Rome's misguided reactions to the Huns (the inconsistency and lack of coordination in policy vis-à-vis the Huns in both halves of the Roman Empire) doomed the Western Roman Empire as a geopolitical entity. What the Romans should have realised, but ultimately failed to do so, was that the Huns were not seeking conquest, but nominal submission from them. If the Romans had done what the Han Chinese had done, they could easily have weathered the *Hunnensturm* and in fact benefited from it. They could have used Hunnic military resources to destroy the empire's other barbarian enemies in return for manageable amounts of tribute to the Huns. Like the Han Chinese they should have waited patiently for the geopolitical landscape to change in their favour. In the case of the Romans that opportunity was not long in coming. In 454 AD following the death of Attila in 453 AD, the Hunnic Empire self-destructed and was torn apart by civil war in a similar way to how the Xiongnu Empire eventually succumbed to civil war.

The Romans, if they had adopted the correct geostrategy, may well have preserved their empire largely intact. Instead, the wrong geopolitical choices made by the Roman ruling elite to a large extent contributed to the fall of the Western Roman Empire. That the Huns were not keen on completely annexing all the territory of large neighbouring empires is seen again very clearly in the section 'Persian collapse' where we will examine the case of Sassanian Persia and its handling of the Hunnic challenge. The Persians fared even worse than the Romans and were in fact conquered outright. However, even after conquering Persia the Central Asian Huns preferred to rule Iran via a puppet Sassanian vassal ruler. How this came about will be discussed shortly. But before we turn to Persia it is necessary to examine how the Eastern Roman Empire reacted to the geopolitical situation after the fall of both the Hunnic Empire and the Western Roman Empire.

The Eastern Roman Empire, its resurgence, temporary pre-eminence and then 'decline'

If the Hunnic Empire was arguably the geopolitical equivalent of the 'Soviet Union' in Late Antiquity, then the Eastern Roman Empire was arguably the 'US' of that era. Now it may seem odd to some of our readers that a mighty hegemonic power like the United States is being compared to the likes of the 'weak', 'decadent' and 'declining' empire of the Eastern Romans or Byzantines. However, as pointed out earlier, the Eastern Roman Empire was far from the declining and corrupt carcass of a state that Gibbon's imagination (which has had such a pervasive impact on modern perceptions of Byzantium) made it to be.³⁵ Just as the US could in some ways be considered to be the continuation of the dominance of Western European powers (a new rejuvenated 'Europe') in world affairs following the demise of the traditional leading powers of Western Europe, namely Britain and France, so too was the Eastern Roman Empire (the new Rome) the rejuvenated continuation of

the once mighty Roman Empire of old, the western half of which had undergone catastrophe and fragmentation at the hands of the Germanic tribes and the Huns. The geographical location of the Eastern Empire, to the east of the fallen Western Roman Empire, does not neatly fit the geographical position of the US vis-à-vis Western Europe (in this case to the west). Nor does the geographical position of the empire, which shared a contiguous border in the Balkans with the Hunnic Empire and with the Sassanian Empire in the Middle East, seem to offer a suitable parallel to the comparative geographical isolation of the United States separated from its main strategic competitors by vast swathes of ocean to the east and west.

However, comparing the geopolitical situation of the Eastern Roman state with that of the US in modern times is much more apt than initially meets the eye. Consider the following parallels. Both the US and the Eastern Roman Empire share a common geostrategic advantage over their mainly land-based rivals (Soviet Union-Hunnic Empire and Persia, which I will argue later was Late Antiquity's geopolitical equivalent of contemporary China). They both have an insurmountable barrier, the Mediterranean Sea/the two oceans flanking the US mainland dominated by the Roman/US fleet, that time and again prevented would-be conquerors from penetrating the entirety of their imperial sphere of influence. One may think that since the US did not and does not share a common border with either the Soviet Union in the past and with China today that the geopolitical situation of the US is radically different from that of the Eastern Roman Empire, but that is a short-sighted miscomprehension of the actual boundaries of the US as a geopolitical entity.

The inner core of the US (its North American territories) is indeed secure from foreign invasions due to the oceans that separate it from its Eurasian competitors,³⁶ just as the inner core of the Eastern Roman Empire, the city of Constantinople, was for a long time, as long as Byzantine naval supremacy was maintained, invulnerable to any attack from either its European or Asian rivals by virtue of its impregnable walls and the surrounding seas dominated by the Roman fleet. However, the tentacles of US imperial power extend far beyond the North American shores of the US. As a geopolitical entity the US shares a border with China in East Asia (most notably on the Korean Peninsula and in the 1960s and 70s in Vietnam) where the US fought two wars, one directly, the other by proxy with the Chinese (somewhat reminiscent of the collisions between the Sassanian Empire and Rome, sometimes also via proxy – via Armenia or the Arab kingdoms of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids)³⁷ and it bordered the Soviet Union (the Hunnic Empire) in Central Europe (US troops stationed in West Germany) during the Cold War.³⁸

In the same way that the Eastern Roman Empire was unable to gain the full-hearted or adequate military contribution-cooperation of the much weaker western Romans and also sometimes had to fight the Germanic tribes invading western Roman territory even whilst trying to hold back the Huns, the US was also frequently frustrated by the inadequate support and lack of cooperation it received from its weakened western allies (in particular France, which like the Western Romans sometimes regarded the US as a competitor and a threat,

not a protector³⁹ and actively tried to go its own way (Charles de Gaulle and his 'third way')). America also had to defeat the troublesome Germans whose Nazi ideology had reduced continental Europe to smouldering ruins. Interestingly, the Romans like the US also periodically allied with the Huns (cf. Soviets) to tackle the Germanic problem before the two powers became irreconcilable in the 440s AD.⁴⁰

True, the US and the Soviet Union never engaged in direct warfare, as did the Hunnic Empire and the Roman Empire, but the economic impact of the 'Cold War' was nonetheless significant. America's over-spending during the Cold War to balance the Soviet Union, especially during the Reagan years caused an acute fiscal problem for the US. Consider the following parallel situation in the eastern Roman Empire following the Hunnic War of 447 AD. The war, as mentioned earlier, was a disaster for the Eastern Romans and they were forced to spend exorbitant amounts of money to pay off the Huns with tribute and also to rebuild their shattered armed forces. Priscus tells us that senators were forced to sell their furniture and also their wives' jewellery to raise cash for their allocated contribution to the tribute to be paid to the Huns. Some are even said to have committed suicide because they could not afford to pay up.⁴¹ The historian Thompson downplayed the severity of this burden imposed on the empire by the tribute payments and accused Priscus of grossly exaggerating, suggesting that in effect Priscus was acting as the mouthpiece for the rich who were not eager to pay extra taxes. He is correct to point out that the tribute demanded by Attila was surprisingly reasonable and not a grave threat to the East Roman treasury. However, a closer reading of Priscus' text reveals other expenditures which Thompson has discounted. Thompson argues that the annual revenue of the Eastern Empire was 270,000 pounds of gold, of which 45,000 was spent on the army.⁴² The money that the Romans agreed to pay Attila, 2,100 pounds of gold per year and 6,000 pounds of gold in arrears (2.2% of the imperial budget), was thus, he argues, insignificant.⁴³

However, as Wickham points out, more like half of the entire imperial budget usually went to feeding and paying the army.⁴⁴ The impressive figures for tax revenue collected in the Eastern Empire are also at times unreliable, suggesting that they were often optimistic estimates of the ideal figures rather than accurate sums.⁴⁵ Expenditure would have been much greater than usual in 447 AD and the years following due to the need to re-equip and virtually rebuild the entire army that had been wiped out in the war. The permanent need to feed the imperial capital which was the second largest expenditure would then have consumed most of the remaining reserves. Add to this the cost of restorations of fortifications and other defensive structures that were immediately required to prevent future Hunnic incursions and the enormous loss in revenue from the devastated Balkan provinces, then the tribute starts to look more ominous.

To make matters worse, as noted earlier, the 8,100 pounds of gold was not the only payment due to the Huns. Ransoms had to be paid for the immense number of prisoners of war taken by the Huns and visiting Hunnic dignitaries like Edeco had to be paid off and lavishly entertained.⁴⁶ In addition, Priscus specifically mentions that tribute was paid not just to the Scythians (i.e. Huns), but also the other barbarian neighbours of the Romans, further draining imperial resources.⁴⁷

It is in this context that Priscus' account of senators selling their wives' jewellery, rich men their furniture and some even committing suicide because they could not meet the required contributions demanded of them by the emperor for the payment of tribute to the Huns, becomes intelligible. True, 8,100 pounds of gold was certainly not enough to suddenly empty the treasuries of the empire as Priscus records. It was its combination with other expenditures that were brought on by the defeat in the Hunnic War that made the Romans cringe.

Later in 545 AD the hard-pressed Eastern Roman Empire under Justinian, with its armies still relatively intact, would buy peace for five years with the Persian Sassanian Empire by offering a payment of 2,000 pounds of gold. In 551 AD a further five-year treaty was signed at the price of 2,600 pounds of gold, which was considered by the Persians, the most formidable power of the age, as a substantial sum,⁴⁸ enough to refrain from war for five years. If that was the case then a lump sum of 8,100 pounds plus unspecified other expenditures and the cost of rebuilding the entire army is no small figure. The losses suffered in the Great Hunnic War of 447 AD, like the excessive spending by the US government to balance the Soviets during the 1980s, were enough to temporarily cause political problems for the governing elite. George Bush Senior, the successor of Reagan, suffered electoral defeat, despite his victory in the Gulf War and the eventual break-up of the Soviet Union, which occurred during his tenure in the White House, due to economic difficulties at home. Likewise, despite the break-up of the Hunnic Empire in the 450s and 460s (culminating in the death of Attila's heir in the West, Dengizich in 469 AD at the hands of the Roman general Anagastes), the East Roman state was rocked by high levels of inflation because the government had throughout the 4th and the 5th centuries minted too much of the small base-metal coinage to help finance its heavy (mainly) military and other fiscal expenditures.⁴⁹ This troubled state of affairs culminated in the downfall of Aspar and his Alan-Goth support base in the Roman politico-military elite,⁵⁰ the previous kingmakers (cf. the Republican establishment), and the subsequent so-called Isaurian coup that brought about regime change of sorts to the empire in the 470s and 480s (cf. the Democratic Party's takeover of the White House?).

Despite these difficulties the Eastern Roman Empire weathered the storm of the Hunnic Wars, just like the US weathered the challenge from the Soviet Union and for a brief while Byzantium was the pre-eminent power in Western Eurasia. The Persians (cf. Chinese) were for a while largely quiet in the second half of the 5th century and could be contained. Imperial finances (as in the US during the Clinton era) was restored to stability during the reign of Anastasius (491–518 AD).⁵¹ Anastasius generally pursued a non-interventionist policy vis-à-vis the Germanic kingdoms of the West and in response the Germanic kingdoms recognised the suzerainty of the Eastern emperor⁵² (just as most of Europe and Middle East acknowledged US leadership and primacy in years directly following the end of the Cold War). Anastasius also kept the peace with the Persians (cf. China-US relations during the Clinton Years) and the empire secure from any external threats from either the Germanic west or the Persian east and with reduced trouble coming from the Hunnic north, was allowed to flourish and recover from the financial strains of the 440s AD

(Hunnic Wars) and 468 AD (Vandal War).⁵³ But then the eastern Empire suffered a bout of hubris and indulged in unnecessary and costly expansionist wars⁵⁴ that eventually precipitated the gradual diminution of its status as the hegemonic power of the Western Eurasian world.

The emperor Justinian (527–65 AD) using both political and religious rhetoric as justification launched a series of wars against his western neighbours, the Vandals in North Africa, the Ostrogoths in Italy and the Visigoths in Spain, who were of no strategic threat to the empire (perhaps with the exception of Vandal North Africa, which originally possessed the naval capacity to trouble the Mediterranean hegemony of Constantinople).⁵⁵ Justinian declared the following as pretext for launching a disastrously long and economically draining war against the Goths:

The Goths have seized Italy, which is our possession, by force, and have not only refused to return it, but have committed wrongs against us which is past endurance. For this reason we have been forced to go to war against them, a war in which both our common hatred of the Goths and our orthodox faith dictates that you should join us, so as to dislodge the Arian heresy.⁵⁶

Justinian's pretext for going to war is so similar to that used by George Bush Junior for the American wars of intervention in the Middle East that it deserves a further analysis.

Justinian emphasises the political illegitimacy of the Gothic regime that 'seized' Italy 'by force' (the same charge was also levelled against Vandal North Africa and Visigothic Spain naturally). Both the Taliban and the regime of Saddam Hussein were likewise accused of being politically illegitimate (undemocratic and dictatorial, which of course they were). The invasion of Justinian's forces was presented as the liberation of the Roman population suffering under the yoke of barbarian oppression – cf. operation 'enduring freedom'. In both cases the 'liberated people' appear at best ambivalent to the 'liberators' and things go badly wrong soon afterwards leading to decades of prolonged conflict in Italy-North Africa-Spain (and quagmire in Iraq-Afghanistan). This imperial overreach is also painted by Justinian in religious terms: 'we Orthodox Christians are battling against the heretical and evil forces of Arianism' (cf. George Bush: 'those who love "freedom"' (American democracy and its 'Christian' religious right) are fighting a holy 'crusade' against the 'axis of evil', who are allied to radical Islamic terrorists). Justinian argues that the Goths 'have committed wrongs against us which is past endurance'. The Goths in reality had done little to offend or do harm to Justinian's empire, but despite the flimsy pretext the invasion went ahead (recall George Bush's unverified talk of weapons of mass destruction to validate the case for invading Iraq, which had done little to harm the US militarily or economically).

Both ill-conceived and geostrategically questionable enterprises produced the same outcome: a long and financially exhausting quagmire of a conflict. The Gothic war in Italy dragged on for decades⁵⁷ (cf. the insurgencies in Iraq and

Afghanistan) and although Justinian had inherited a prosperous and economically stable empire in the early 6th century (as Bush had inherited an economically dynamic US), he left it in serious financial difficulties (not only due to these military expenditures to be sure, but also they compounded the difficulties facing the imperial government).⁵⁸ Even the initially easy conquest of Vandal North Africa,⁵⁹ which ideally should have immediately provided the empire with new revenue given Africa's immensely rich and fertile soil (recall Iraq and its abundant oil reserves), provided the empire with an unexpected problem: the need for military, administrative and building investment (reconstruction costs in Iraq).⁶⁰ Add to this a disaster that no one could possibly have foreseen – the plague of 541 AD⁶¹ (cf. the financial crisis of 2007/8) – the empire was left in serious economic difficulties.⁶²

More problematic from a geostrategic point of view, was the fact that Justinian had taken his eyes off the real geopolitical problem facing the Eastern Roman Empire, the resurgent might of the Sassanian Persian state⁶³ under Khosrau I (reigned 531–79 AD) (arguably the equivalent in geopolitical terms to today's China) that threatened Roman hegemony in the Middle East (the East Asia of the day, which was home to the greatest concentration of economic wealth in the whole of Western Eurasia). The East Romans were preoccupied in Europe (the equivalent of the geostrategically less valuable Middle East and Africa of today) and wasting more and more of their diminishing military resources in strategically dubious wars of re-conquest. Meanwhile, the Asian provinces, the economic heartland of the empire and the main source of the empire's revenues became increasingly vulnerable to Persian military aggression due to imperial complacency in this area (recall China's sabre-rattling in the South China Sea and the East China Sea and the expansion of Chinese influence in ASEAN and the Korean Peninsula, while the US complacently focused its resources and attention elsewhere during most of the Bush years and arguably also during much of the following Obama presidency, despite the rhetoric of pivot to Asia).

In 540 AD while Justinian's armies were engaged in Italy and Africa the Persians invaded in strength and sacked the rich cities of Syria one after the other, until they finally sacked the great metropolis of Antioch, the second city of the Eastern Roman Empire.⁶⁴ Only the fortuitous combination of the paralysing effects of the plague that also affected the Persian invading armies⁶⁵ and the rather slow, but fortunately not belated, redirection of imperial resources to the east somewhat stymied the Persian advance. However, despite this lucky break the strategic implications of the poor decision made by Justinian to leave his eastern borders inadequately defended in the face of growing Persian power and influence in the region became manifest in the unfavourable outcome to the war in 561/2 AD, which left the Romans paying an annual tribute to the Persians totalling 30,000 gold nomismata.⁶⁶ Although the Roman position in the east was not yet doomed or even desperate at the conclusion of the Persian War, it nonetheless had taken a hammering. Eastern Roman prestige suffered due to its slowness in countering the Persian threat and for failing to aggressively retaliate against any military provocation from Persia. America's geopolitical clout in East Asia has similarly

suffered among America's client states due to the slowness and indecisive manner in which Washington has reacted to Chinese aggression (in the South China Sea and East China Sea) in the past two decades. This was of course largely due to the lack of military and economic resources, rather than lack of will on the part of Constantinople (arguably the problem also faced by the Obama administration when attempting to shift military resources to the Pacific, while having to scale down America's military commitments overall due to economic and political considerations).

Exacerbating the problems arising from this reduction in imperial prestige and influence in the Middle East was also the rather mild, but nonetheless significant ethno-religious 'friction' of sorts between the largely 'Greek' and religiously 'Orthodox' Chalcedonian provinces of Europe and Asia Minor and the linguistically 'Hamito-Semitic', Syriac⁶⁷ and Coptic, anti-Chalcedonian provinces of the East.⁶⁸ The Eastern Roman government never really succeeded in overcoming this ethno-religious problem and never fully integrated the ethnically non-Greek populations of the Middle East into its ruling elite. Had they done so perhaps the East Roman hegemony in Western Eurasia would not have faded as early as it did in the 7th century AD.

This is also instructive to the dilemma facing the US in East Asia. The US like the East Roman Empire has a quasi-religious (secular religion as it were) political creed called democracy (which incidentally also protects the freedom of religious expression to varying degrees whether they be Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu). This is espoused by most countries in ASEAN and North East Asia in sharp contrast to the authoritarianism (and official atheism) of Communist China and its communist allies. Just as there was a sizable minority of periodically persecuted Christians within the Sassanian Empire,⁶⁹ so too in modern China there is a minority of persecuted democracy activists and sympathisers who actively or furtively pursue the agenda of democratisation within China.⁷⁰ If the Romans had played their cards correctly and exploited this advantage (Christians in the Persian Empire, who could have acted as a fifth column), as well as mending fences with religious and ethnic minorities in their own Eastern Provinces, long-term stability (if not outright advantage over the Sassanians) may well have been a possibility for Constantinople. However, by adhering to doctrinal dogma and failing to compromise over semantics, while at the same time diverting much needed resources away from the key core area (from the rich provinces of Syria and Egypt to the barren and poverty stricken Balkans and the West) the Eastern Roman state lost its hegemony.

The US should take note and refrain from becoming trapped in any ideological precision that may alienate natural allies ('democracies' and semi-authoritarian states in East Asia that still maintain some non-democratic practices for instance). It must also make an effort to more fully integrate its minority populations into the upper echelons of its political and economic hierarchy. By doing so, the US will be able to more effectively embrace/utilise, for instance, the transnational Asian elite whose active cooperation is needed to maintain America's hegemony in the so-called 'Asian Century'.

The return of East Roman attention to the east in the second half of the 6th century AD prevented the Persians from actively seeking a decisive victory over the Romans and seriously contesting Roman control of Syria, Egypt and Anatolia.⁷¹ The new emperor Justin II⁷² and in particular the circumspect Tiberius, who succeeded him, reversed the strategic losses suffered by the empire under Justinian. Tiberius in particular wisely abandoned or scaled down efforts to maintain Roman positions in Italy. After the conclusion of the abortive campaign in Italy under Baduarius, Tiberius refused to spend any more money on the West, set up exarchs in the western provinces of Italy and Africa to cut costs, ignored Avar pressures in the Balkans (which resulted in the fall of Sirmium to the Avars, but of trivial importance strategically), and instead wisely focused on the East. He furthermore, avoided religious disputes and enjoyed a good reputation among the Monophysites.⁷³ In other words, he played all his cards correctly from a geostrategic point of view and this gradually reaped dividends.

Furthermore, the geopolitical map of wider Eurasia was also suddenly changing much to the advantage of the East Romans in the second half of the 6th century AD. Mid-century the Turks established their vast empire in Inner Asia after overthrowing their overlords the Rouran and also the Hephthalite Huns.⁷⁴ This development initially favoured the Sassanians as it released them from their vassalage to the Hephthalites. However, during the reign of Justin II Turkish policies towards Persia changed radically, partially it seems due to the economic interests of Sogdian merchants (major stakeholders in the Turkic imperial enterprise),⁷⁵ who desired to trade directly with Byzantium without the interference of the Persians between the two empires. This change in Turkish policy facilitated the first contacts between Rome and the Turks. The first Turk delegation arrived in Constantinople in 563 AD, dispatched according to Theophanes by a certain Askel, king of the Kermikhions (Persians called the Turks by this name because of the incorporation of the Hephthalite Huns into the Turkish empire by this stage). Askel was actually the name of the first tribe mentioned in the Chinese list of the Nushih-pi confederation of the western Turks, the westernmost tribal group that formed a part of the wider Turkish empire. A much more important embassy led by the Sogdian Maniakh representing a certain Silziboulos arrived in 568 AD.⁷⁶

It is not totally clear who the person whom the Byzantines called Silziboulos may have been. He was, however, clearly a vassal king who owed allegiance to Khagan Muhan, the supreme ruler of the Khaganate. Political matters soon overshadowed economic matters in the negotiations between the two powers and Justin II took a keen interest in the peoples conquered by the Turks: the Hephthalites and the Avars, and quickly seized the opportunity to conclude an alliance with the Turks against the European Avars and the Persians. This was a momentous decision and in 569 AD a return embassy was sent under the *strategos* Zemarkhos who accompanied Maniakh back to the Turkish court.⁷⁷ Zemarkhos was then invited by the Turkish ruler to accompany the Turks in a minor foray against the Persians. An altercation also developed during Zemarkhos' visit, between his Turkish hosts and the Persian ambassador.⁷⁸

The Persians, acutely conscious of the magnitude of the danger posed by this Byzantine-Turk alliance, attempted to ambush the embassy and this forced Zemarkhos to take a detour on his return journey. Zemarkhos was accompanied on his way back by Tarkhan Tagma, the head of a new Turk mission to Constantinople. Between 568–76 diplomatic contacts between the two powers were frequent. Menander mentions five Roman embassies to the Turks. In 576 AD a certain Valentine went on his second diplomatic mission to the Turks accompanied by 106 Turks returning to their country. He was received by Turxath, son of Silziboulos. The Roman ambassadors were obliged to attend the funeral of the deceased ruler and had to undergo the ordeal of lacerating their faces to show their respects for the deceased Silziboulos in accordance with Turkish custom. Turxath is described as one of the eight rulers who shared rule over the Turks, Arsilas being the name of the most prominent ruler.⁷⁹

The alliance between the Turks and the Byzantines was not without mishaps. Turxath, mentioned above, gave the embassy from Constantinople a stormy reception due to his anger at the Byzantine harbouring of fugitive Avars. The purpose of the Byzantine mission was to inform the Turks of Tiberius II's accession to co-emperor with Justin II and to strengthen the anti-Persian alliance. Turxath in retaliation for the perceived Byzantine double-dealing with the Avars (the enemies of the Turks) incited Anagai, prince of the Utigurs and a certain Bokhan to capture the Byzantine city of Bosphorus in the Crimea in 576 AD. However, although Turxath was hostile to the Romans, his hostility did not represent the policy of Tardu his superior, the son of Ishtemi and ruler of the western sub-division of the Turk Empire. Turxath was a close relative of Tardu. Silzibulos, his father, was a vassal king within the quasi-feudal hierarchy of the Turks.⁸⁰ Turxath therefore allowed the embassy to continue on to Tardu. During the reign of Tiberius the Turks initiated major military activities against the Sassanids in the late 580s and then in connection with the revolt of Bahram Chobin against Khosrau II.⁸¹

As a result of this astute diplomatic activity, the geostrategic decision to ally with the Turks and also the disentanglement from unnecessary expenditures and involvement in the west, Constantinople's position vis-à-vis Persia was immensely improved. To top it all a priceless opportunity was granted to the empire when the Persian king Khosrau II (reigned 590–628 AD), who had been deposed from the Persian throne, was restored to his former position via the aid given to him by the East Roman emperor Maurice, who had succeeded Tiberius.⁸² This was an enormous strategic opportunity that should have been exploited to the maximum and all available resources of the empire should have been devoted to the safeguarding of strategic gains made in the east via this successful intervention in Persian affairs. Not only would this have guaranteed further stability in the East, but also prevented any renewed outbreak of war with Persia, which in its weakened state after a civil war would not have felt confident to test the concentrated military might of the Romans in Syria and Mesopotamia.

However, Maurice just like Justinian before him took his eye off the ball. Again thinking (wrongly) that gratitude for his aid would check indefinitely Khosrau's ambitions and the Persian threat, he took his armies away from the

East, the strategically vital area, and deployed them in strategically dubious and indecisive wars in the Balkans with the Avars.⁸³ The Avars,⁸⁴ who first appear in Europe in the mid-6th century AD during the reign of Justinian and who may have been the defeated remnants of either the Rouran Khaganate in Mongolia or the Hephthalite White Hun Empire in Central Asia and Eastern Iran,⁸⁵ rapidly recreated the old Hunnic Empire in its entirety.⁸⁶ Within ten years of taking over the Hunnic confederacy of the Utigur and Kutrigur Bulgars in the Ukraine and Southern Russia in 557 AD and receiving the submission of the Sabirs, Onogurs and Barsils⁸⁷ (the inhabitants of the Volga region), they conquered all of central Europe. In 565/566 AD they defeated and captured the Frankish king Sigibert.⁸⁸ In 567 AD they destroyed the Gepids in Hungary and in 568 AD snatched Austria from the departing Lombards.⁸⁹ In the same year 10,000 Kutrigur Bulgar Huns under the command of the Avar Khagan Bayan, sacked the cities of Dalmatia. By the end of the century they had also conquered much of the Balkans⁹⁰ and all the Slavs up to the Baltic Sea.⁹¹

This Avar menace (cf. the 'resurgence' of Russian power under the Putin regime) as formidable as it appeared, was, however, not a serious concern for the East Romans strategically. The Avars and their Hunnic vassals were formidable on land and this triggered the wholesale adoption of their tactics and armour by the East Romans, as can be seen in Maurice's *Strategikon*.⁹² Yet, this powerful land army of the Avar-Huns could not realistically threaten the impregnable stronghold of Constantinople without a powerful navy, which they lacked entirely. Furthermore, the Balkans, which had been repeatedly devastated since the time of Justinian by the Bulgar Huns,⁹³ was hardly an important source of revenue for the East Romans. The diplomatic art of 'carrot and stick' approach was needed, mixing affordable concessions (a mild tribute) with the occasional demonstration of Roman vigilance (a series of light offensives involving only limited number of troops to occasionally counter isolated Avar raiders in the Balkans) to keep those concessions reasonable, while maintaining the concentration of military power where it mattered, in Syria and the eastern border with the Sassanids. The US, I would argue should similarly make a deal with Russia (more on this later), strengthen ties with China's hostile neighbours: Japan, Vietnam and India (cf. the Byzantine alliance with the Turks) and concentrate on containing Chinese efforts to expand their influence in Eurasia and the Pacific region. Despite the humiliating appearance of this strategy which involved payment of regular tribute-subsidy to the Avars, this was by far the less expensive and most sensible strategy.

That the Avars were not actually a serious geostrategic menace to the survival of Eastern Roman power is well demonstrated by what happened in 626 AD. The Avars together with the Persians laid siege to Constantinople,⁹⁴ but because both empires lacked a navy, despite the desperate and weakened state of the East Romans, the siege ended in disastrous failure for the Avars and this failure soon triggered a civil war within their Khaganate that split the Avar Empire in two,⁹⁵ into the Avar Khaganate in Hungary and Great Bulgaria under the leadership of the Onogurs ruled by Kubrat⁹⁶ (from the Dulo clan⁹⁷ which claimed Attilid descent from Ernak) in the Ukraine.⁹⁸

Although the Avars were without a doubt a superpower ruling most of Central and Eastern Europe,⁹⁹ their incursions into the Balkans did not warrant a full scale imperial response, but this is exactly what Maurice decided to do. The campaign against the Avars went surprisingly well in the beginning, but soon became a difficult ordeal for the imperial troops involved. The Roman troops, starving and depleted, eventually mutinied and murdered the emperor and his entire family.¹⁰⁰ Maurice's short-sighted geostrategic blunder brought about dire consequences for the empire. Firstly, his policy of shifting attention away from the Persian frontier and moving much-needed troops from the east to the Balkans only succeeded in diminishing the empire's military resources without ever successfully dealing a decisive blow on the Avars. The power of the Avars remained intact after the war and they soon re-conquered all of the Balkan territories that had been briefly recovered by Maurice during the war.

The empire had wasted precious resources on negligible results and to make matters much worse, the absence of a strong military presence in the key strategic area, the Persian frontier, whetted Persian appetite for renewed aggression against visibly weakened Roman defences. The murder of Maurice and his family by Phocas and his mutineers even gave Khosrau the appropriate and legitimate pretext for renewing hostilities against the Romans, to avenge the death of his benefactor, the emperor Maurice. The Great Byzantine-Persian War¹⁰¹ that followed was a complete disaster for the East Romans and signalled the beginning of the end of Roman hegemony in Western Eurasia.

Dara on the Euphrates fell to the Persians in 604 AD and the cities east of the Euphrates fell like dominos soon thereafter. Defeat continued in Asia Minor and Syria and culminated in the shocking fall of Damascus and more importantly in symbolic terms of Jerusalem in 614 AD. Further Persian triumphs in Anatolia saw the sacking of Ephesus and Sardis and the arrival of a Persian army within sight of Constantinople itself at Chalcedon on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus.¹⁰² The fall of the great metropolis of Alexandria – the capital of East Roman Egypt – followed in 619 AD. By 621 AD most of the Middle Eastern provinces of the empire were in Persian hands and the Avars were in possession of all of the Balkans. All that was left of the empire were scattered pockets of resistance in Anatolia and Constantinople itself under siege by the Avars and Persians, with scattered possession in Italy and North Africa (too far away for either the Avars or the Persians to invade) continuing to pay allegiance to what looked like an empire about to follow the precedent of its fallen western twin.¹⁰³

Just when everything seemed desperate and hopeless the tide turned in favour of the Romans in 626 AD. The Avars and Persians were repulsed at Constantinople and the alliance with the Turks first articulated long before the war by the much maligned Emperor Justin II, paid off handsomely for the empire. Tung Yabghu Khagan of the Western Turks began to support Heraclius' war effort against the Persians via Ziebel his general and the 40,000 reinforcements he led.¹⁰⁴ According to Moses Dasxuranci, Khosrau's pleas for Turkish neutrality in the war and to remember the old ties of friendship between the Sassanids and the Turks, fell on deaf ears. The allied force of Romans and Turks besieged Tiflis in 627 AD

and the Turks pillaged Persia repeatedly.¹⁰⁵ The Turks drew critical Persian military resources away from Roman territory¹⁰⁶ and the allies decisively defeated the Persians leading to the Persian abandonment of all of their conquests and the signing of a peace treaty in 629–30 AD.¹⁰⁷ However, despite the fairy-tale ending to the war for Byzantium, the heroics of the emperor Heraclius¹⁰⁸ and the emotional restoration of the True Cross (the religious-ideological symbol of the empire) to Jerusalem, more than two decades of conflict with the Persians had left an open wound on the exhausted body of the empire which could not be quickly stitched back together. The empire desperately needed time to recover. That luxury was not given to the Romans and a new power on the horizon, the Arab Muslims, stormed into the Middle East in 636 AD¹⁰⁹ and took away from the Romans, this time irrevocably, the richest provinces of the empire, which had only recently, just barely, been recovered from the invading Persians less than ten years before. Alexandria was Arab by 642 AD¹¹⁰ and by 674 AD the Arabs were at the very gates of Constantinople itself.

The empire, thanks to its new secret weapon, ‘Greek fire’ (the nuclear bomb of Middle Ages), the strength of its navy that achieved parity with the invading Arab fleet,¹¹¹ and the gift of geography that made Constantinople virtually unsailable to any invasion that did not entail absolute naval supremacy, survived in a much weakened and reduced form (comprising the coastal areas of the Balkans, southern Italy and Anatolia). However, its previous pre-eminence in Western Eurasia was never recovered. The case of the Eastern Roman Empire offers us many lessons for the contemporary global hegemony of the United States, especially since the Byzantine geopolitical situation closely mimics that of the US. Therefore, the erroneous geostrategic choices made by the East Romans are also food for thought for the United States. Quite clearly, the lack of focus on the part of the Eastern Roman government and their wasteful expenditure of precious military and economic resources on strategically not vital areas of interest brought about the demise of Roman hegemony in Western Eurasia. The Romans should have concentrated their resources in the key vital area, the Persian frontier in the Middle East (I would argue the equivalent of today’s East Asia) and via military vigilance and coordination with allies kept in check the expansionist ambitions of the Persians (the equivalent of the Chinese), their only true geopolitical rival.

By diverting military resources away from this key area the Romans unintentionally tempted the Persians to embark on a mutually destructive war of expansion that was triggered by the perception of weakness in Roman military defences in the region. The same I would argue would be case if the US were to divert its attention away from the key area, East Asia, and indulge in useless conflicts with lesser powers in other geopolitically less valuable regions (e.g. the Middle East and Western or Eastern Europe, in opposition to say the Russians, the geopolitical equivalent of the Huns and their successors the Avars). China may feel emboldened due to the lack of US military muscle in East Asia to engage in acts of aggression against its weaker, but wealthy neighbours in East Asia or simply seduce these countries, that feel abandoned by the lack of US attention, into its sphere of geopolitical influence. Either scenario will eventually be unacceptable

to the US because the Chinese domination of East Asia would mean the veritable end of US world hegemony and the emergence of a Chinese hegemony over the globe. The US must therefore concentrate its attention and resources on East Asia and not repeat the mistakes made by the East Romans.

3.3 Persian collapse

If the Eastern Roman Empire was Late Antiquity's equivalent of the United States, then Sassanian Persia was arguably the geopolitical equivalent of China. We will first examine how the Persians reacted to the Hunnic threat and how this geopolitical dilemma was eventually resolved for the Persians. Then we will move on to the assessment of the geopolitical options that were open to Persia at the time of the resolution of the Hunnic threat.

The embarrassing payment of tribute to the Huns and the loss of territory in the east for the self-proclaimed ruler of both Iran and non-Iran were deeply problematic for the self-image and legitimacy of the Sassanian dynasty. The Sassanian king Yazdegerd II (reigned 438–57) ca. 442 AD attempted to end this unacceptable situation by halting the humiliating tribute payments owed to the Kidarite Huns. He initially had surprising success. By 450 AD the Persians not only managed to halt Kidarite incursions into Persian territory, but also even regained some of the territory in eastern Iran lost earlier to the Huns, namely the region of Taliqan (probably in northwestern Afghanistan).

Unfortunately for the Persians this minor success was due more to Hunnic internal problems than to an increase in Persian military might. The Kidarite dynasty at this stage was facing an existential challenge to their hegemony among the Central Asian Huns from a new rival dynasty, the Hephthalites (possibly the former vassals of the Rouran who were seeking to hijack the leadership of the White Hunnic Empire). The Kidarites found themselves trapped in a pincer movement by the Hephthalites and the Sassanians and were forced to seek an escape route south into India.

Around 456 AD or maybe slightly earlier around 454 AD Yazdegerd was feeling confident enough to demand reverse tribute from the Kidarite Huns. The Kidarite Huns had been weakened by the defeats they had suffered at the hands of the Hephthalites, but they were not about to pay tribute to their former vassals. A sharp counter-attack soon followed and the Persians suffered a devastating defeat which effectively reversed most of the previous Persian gains. The situation was made worse by the subsequent death of Yazdegerd that in turn triggered a civil war between claimants to the Sassanian throne. The next Sassanian king Peroz (reigned 457–84) had to rely on an army supplied by the Hephthalite Huns to overcome his brother Hormizd. Hunnic aid, however, came at a price and Peroz may have had to cede to the Hephthalites the formerly Kidarite possession of Taliqan.

The Kidarites now sensed that the Persians were seriously vulnerable and increased military pressure from the east. By 464 AD Peroz, desperately short of funds to maintain his army, swallowed his pride and went hat in hand to the

Eastern Romans, asking for financial aid against the Kidarite Huns. The Romans, however, rejected this request. Having run out of options, Peroz offered the Kidarite ruler Khunkhas his sister's hand in marriage in return for peace. By this measure Peroz bought much needed time to recuperate his losses and presumably used the breathing space to also strengthen his alliance with the Hephthalites, planning to strike against the Kidarites at the next available opportunity. To add insult to injury he had resorted to subterfuge and sent a woman of lowly status rather than his sister as wife to Khunkhas. The Hunnic king soon discovered the trick and sought to avenge the insult done to his honour. He invited 300 of Peroz's officers to his realm and then murdered or mutilated them in order to humiliate the Sassanian king. The peace was broken and at the resumption of hostilities the balance was tipped in favour of Peroz when the Hephthalites intervened on the side of the Persians. The Kidarite capital of Balaam (possibly Balkh?) fell in 467 AD and the Persians thought that they had finally rid themselves of the Hunnic menace. This was not to be, however, and worse was still to come.

The alliance between the Hephthalites and the Persians against the Kidarites did not survive the end of the conflict. The Hephthalites soon seized all the Kidarite territory Peroz had taken and united all the White Huns under their leadership. Peroz tried to recover his losses, but was heavily defeated by a Hephthalite king called Akhshunwar (or Khushnavaz).¹¹² Peroz was captured by the Huns on two occasions and each time, due to the surprising leniency of his Hephthalite foes, managed to return alive to Persia by agreeing to pay a large ransom and also a tribute. He was, furthermore, forced to send one of his sons to the Hephthalite court as a hostage as a guarantee of his future good behaviour. Peroz, however, simply could not accept the reality of vassalage to the Huns and revolted against the Huns once again. According to Procopius (1.3.1–22; 1.4.1–14), the end of the Sassanian king was tragic. He was slaughtered together with most of his army by the Hephthalites in 484 AD.¹¹³

In the subsequent decades the victorious White Huns actively intervened in Sassanian internal affairs. In 488 AD Kavad, one of Peroz's surviving sons, was married to either the daughter or sister of the reigning Hunnic king and then installed on the Sassanian throne by a Hunnic army.¹¹⁴ Kavad's reign as the puppet of his Hephthalite overlords was not without problems and ten years later he was forced to flee to the Hephthalite court due to a revolt. The Hephthalites then supplied him with a force of 30,000 men to reassert his rule. Kavad, in order to display his gratitude to his Hephthalite patrons, ceded more territory to the Huns and paid an increased annual tribute. Sassanian coins destined as tribute to the Hephthalites was countermarked with a Hephthalite Hunnic sign¹¹⁵ and via this act the hegemony of the Huns over Persia was fully acknowledged.

What is remarkable is the extent to which the White Huns continuously chose to retain a Sassanian vassal ruler on the throne of Persia (despite repeated attempts at revolt by the Persians). The obvious, logical, geopolitical choice for the Sassanians during the years of Hunnic ascendancy was to simply retrench and pay the required tribute to ward off further Hunnic invasions. The Huns repeatedly overran Persia, but chose not to occupy its heartland. This was a

clear indication that the Huns were not interested in ruling Persia directly (their empire in Central Asia and India was already growing too large for them to govern effectively). In the end the Persian monarchy was saved, not by any wise geostrategic choices made by the Sassanian kings (in adapting to the geopolitical challenge offered by the Huns, they proved astonishingly inept), but by the Hunnic political preference for maintaining tributary relations with larger vassal states remote from their centre of power. Kavad (who really had no choice in the matter, since he was literally propped up and maintained in his position as Sassanian king by a Hephthalite army) finally complied and faithfully served his Hunnic overlords.

The Persians continued to pay tribute to the Huns for another 60 years until the 550s AD. By that stage King Khosrau I (531–79 AD) had been ruler of the Persians for over two decades. Quite unexpectedly during this reign the Sassanians were abruptly liberated from the Hunnic yoke. In the middle of the 6th century AD a new power emerged in the eastern steppes, the Turks. The Hephthalites had been associated in some way with the powerful Rouran Khaganate in Mongolia. The Rouran, however, were overthrown by the Göktürks and the new Turkic rulers of Inner Asia now sought to conquer the White Huns as well.

The Turks soon made their first move by seizing the city of Tashkent from the Hephthalites. They then engaged the Hephthalite main army near Bukhara. A gigantic and ultimately decisive eight-day battle ensued, resulting in the complete defeat of the Hephthalite Huns. The Turks overran Transoxiana and the Hephthalites retreated south after choosing a new king called Faganish (also called Afganish). The long-suffering Persians now saw their opportunity and pounced on the defeated Hephthalites. Trapped between the Persians and the Turks the last Hephthalite king surrendered to King Khosrau of Persia sometime between 560 and 563 AD.

With the Huns who had menaced their eastern borders for 200 years finally gone, the Sassanians in the middle of the 6th century AD had a golden opportunity to rebuild their empire and cement their geopolitical position.¹¹⁶ Instead a series of major geostrategic errors exhausted the empire's resources and military strength. It will be argued henceforth that the experience of the Persians in Late Antiquity is analogous to the Chinese historical experience in early modern times and its ultimate fate informative for Chinese policymakers of today.

We have already touched briefly on the Great Perso-Byzantine War above. In the aftermath of that catastrophe the Persian Empire quickly collapsed at the hands of the Muslim Arabs. Unlike the Eastern Roman Empire that hung on and survived as a significant, albeit not dominant, power for another half a millennium (until the fall of Constantinople to the crusaders in 1204, which marked the end of Byzantium as a serious geopolitical power of any sort), the Sassanian Empire of the Persians collapsed completely and was conquered by the Arabs.¹¹⁷ The last Persian crown prince fled ironically perhaps (?) to Tang China.¹¹⁸ The parallels between the history of Parthian-Sassanian Persia and that of modern China are so striking that they justify the accordance of the equivalent geopolitical role that China has today to the Persian empire in Late Antiquity.

Since the foundation of autocratic empire under Augustus Caesar, other than the Huns, who we have discussed earlier, the Romans never encountered an enemy that threatened the very existence of their empire. The 'barbarian' peoples on the empire's fringes whether they be Germanic, Berber or Arab were merely annoying nuisances that could be dealt with at leisure. Of the three groups mentioned above the Germanic tribes, because of their numbers and connections with steppe peoples such as the Sarmatians to the east, were the most menacing. However, because of their political fragmentation the Germanic tribes never posed a threat to the empire's survival or its political hegemony over Western Eurasia. Yet, ever since the 1st century BC there was in fact a power strong enough to rival, though not overwhelm, the Roman Empire and its hegemony. That power was Persia, which in many ways was the only serious imperial competitor to the Romans in Western Eurasia.

Just as China of today has an imperial tradition that far predates the foundation of the US, the imperial history of the Persians was more ancient than that of the Romans. It began with the famed Achaemenids (550 BC–330 BC) who ruled a vast empire that stretched from Greece to India, from Scythia to Nubia. These original old Persians may have had an Inner Asian origin, just like the Parthians (who would later claim their mantle)¹¹⁹ and the Huns. It has been argued quite convincingly that the influx of Inner Asian Saka (Scythian) nomads¹²⁰ had a profound impact on the culture and administrative practices of the preceding Median Empire and then the Persian Achaemenid Empire.¹²¹ Possibly as a result of this Inner Asian influence the Achaemenids gradually developed a political system which has been described as 'feudal' or quasi-feudal.¹²² This system was one in which the king ruled through local intermediaries (in the eastern half of the empire possibly military lords of Scythian/Saka origin) who provided levies for the king's army¹²³ and were tied to the central imperial government in Susa and Persepolis by an intricate web of land grants in return for providing military resources (as in later Medieval Europe), tribute payments and gift exchanges.¹²⁴

What this suggests is that the Persians possessed a system of governance that was distinct from that of the Greco-Romans. As Cribb points out, a system very similar to this existed also in ancient Inner Asia from where the Persians originated. In Inner Asia a small powerful elite owned vast numbers of animals that they farmed out to 'tenant' households. Political power and large grants of land and peoples were likewise concentrated in the hands of a very select group of royalty and associated aristocratic families. Cribb uses the term 'pastoral feudalism' to describe this Inner Asian political model.¹²⁵ The appropriateness of using the term 'feudal' here and also in the Persian case, is debatable, but the similarities are so strong that a case can be made for using modified terms such as 'quasi-feudal' or 'proto-feudal' to describe this Inner Asian political system and also the Iranian Parthian and Sassanian political system.

Thus, just as China had a long and proud political tradition (the 'Confucian' tradition) of empire (which coincidentally originated in the 'feudal' system of the Zhou dynasty), so too could the Persians hark back to a glorious and ancient past with matching political complexities and intricate organisation. This mighty

Achaemenid Persian Empire – in ways somewhat reminiscent of the collapse of the Ming Empire to the ‘barbarian’ Manchus under their charismatic Aisin Gioro ruling clan – fell prey to a ‘barbarian’ invasion from abroad: the Macedonian invasion under Alexander. Just as internal decay and rebellion had weakened the Ming prior to the Qing onslaught, the Achaemenid Empire was also reeling from the destabilising effects of internal revolts (led by satraps) and regional insurgencies (like those in Egypt).

After a period of Greek-Macedonian interregnum (mainly under the Seleucid dynasty), the Persian Empire fell to newcomers from Inner Asia, the Parthians. What is noteworthy of course is that China also until 1911 AD was under the control of an Inner Asian dynasty, that of the above-mentioned Manchus. Just as the Manchu Qing dynasty left a significant imprint on modern China, so would the Parthians on their successors the Sassanian Persians.

The Parthian state was formed after the conquest of the frontier satrapy of Parthia (reminiscent of the Manchu takeover of the frontier province of Liaodong from the Ming dynasty) by an Inner Asian people of Iranian extraction called the Parni,¹²⁶ which was itself a member of the three tribe confederation of the Dahae.¹²⁷ The kingdom of the Royal Scythians immortalised by Herodotus two centuries earlier interestingly enough also possessed three tribes, which was probably a reflection of the tripartite division of political power among the dominant tribes that characterised Inner Asian political entities like the Xiongnu and the Scythians. The Parthian state became a full-fledged imperial entity covering the whole of Persia under Mithradates I (171–38 BC) in the mid-2nd century BC¹²⁸ (recall the unification of China by the Qing Kangxi Emperor).

However, just like the Manchus in China, the new Inner Asian masters of Iran and Mesopotamia soon came under intense pressure from other invaders from Inner Asia, the formidable Saka tribes and the Tochari¹²⁹ (the Saka tribes remind us of the formidable Oirat Zunghars who defied the Qing during the reigns of the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors in the 18th century before their incorporation into the empire). Under pressure from steppe enemies, the Parthians were forced to adapt their political and military structures to cope with the threat.¹³⁰ Significant numbers of Saka and other Inner Asians were co-opted by the Parthians, just as the Chinggisid-Dayaniid Mongol princes were co-opted by the Qing. The Saka entered Parthian service and became part of its political and military establishment¹³¹ (cf. incorporation of the Mongols into the Manchu banner system).

It was with this steppe type army, which probably included large Saka contingents, that the great Surena inflicted a stunning defeat on the numerically superior Roman army under Crassus at Carrhae. In this battle Surena employed tactics that one would see again and again in steppe warfare, a constant rain of arrows from a distance by mounted archers to wear down the opposing force, feigned retreats to entice an infantry formation to break ranks, and then the devastating charge of the cataphract, heavy cavalry to deliver the *coup de grâce*.¹³² Surena was a member of the Suren noble house that was one of the six elite families of the Parthian Empire.¹³³ The Suren lords seem to have played a significant role in repulsing and then settling the Saka tribes in the eastern provinces of the Parthian Empire. They

eventually became the hereditary marcher-lords of Drangiana (Sistan, named after the Saka who settled there).¹³⁴ Bivar is therefore probably correct in identifying the heavy horsemen in Surena's cavalry with troops levied from among the Saka in Margiana and Sistan.¹³⁵ According to Plutarch (Crassus 21.6), Surena commanded a personal armed retinue of 1,000 heavily armed cataphract cavalry¹³⁶ and 10,000 other horsemen (his vassals and slaves,¹³⁷ mainly mounted archers). The significant role played by Mongol cavalry in the stunning Manchu victories over the Koreans and the Chinese and their prominence in the Manchu banner system offer a point of comparison with this Parthian co-option of the Saka nomads.

Although there are obviously great differences between the Parthian state and Manchu China, the eventual demise of both empires followed a similar pattern. The internal weaknesses of both empires were exposed by the invasions of western powers: the Romans and the Western Europeans (the British, French, Germans etc.). One military failure after another (the invasions of Trajan, Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus, each of which ended with the fall of the Parthian capital Ctesiphon to the Romans) embarrassed the Parthian ruling house, the Arsacids, and diminished their prestige in the eyes of the Persian people. Exactly the same thing happened to the Manchus. Beijing the imperial capital was repeatedly violated by western invaders during the Second Opium War and the Boxer Rebellion. This period of weakness was then ended by the rise of 'nationalist' elements: the nationalist and communist regimes of China, and the 'national' dynasty of the Sassanids who claimed native Persian origins in opposition to the 'foreign' origins of the Parthian Arsacids. The anti-Manchu and anti-foreign rhetoric of the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 quickly comes to mind.

Yet, just as Communist China in many ways is the territorial and even to some extent administrative and institutional successor to the Qing Empire and most of its constituent territories, the Sassanians who replaced the Parthians preserved most of the political institutions of their Parthian predecessors.¹³⁸ In fact, the great Parthian noble families continued to rule under a different dynasty, the Sassanians, which simply stepped into the power vacuum left by the declining Arsacids. The powerful 'Parthian' families: Karen, Suren, Mihran, Ispahbudhan, Kanarangian became in effect co-partners in imperial rule with the reigning Sassanians.¹³⁹ Thus, the so-called 'native' Persian Empire of the Sassanids was in fact a Sassanian-Parthian confederacy,¹⁴⁰ a similar quasi-feudal empire,¹⁴¹ which closely resembled the Inner Asian state polity of the Parthian Arsacids that had preceded it.¹⁴² The Parthian nobility, which provided the Sassanids with their heavy cavalry, formed the backbone of the Persian military establishment.¹⁴³ They were so powerful that towards the end of the Sassanian period the Mihranid Bahram-i Chubin (590–1 AD) dethroned Khosrau II and briefly ascended the throne. Another Parthian noble, Vistahm of the Ispahbudhan family would again threaten Khosrau II with a huge revolt that spread from Khurasan to Azerbaijan (595–600).¹⁴⁴

Like the Arsacids the Sassanians would maintain a *comitatus*, a royal body-guard and would frequently employ mercenary troops from the steppe to augment their cavalry force.¹⁴⁵ Their empire, like the Arsacid state before it,

had its vassal kings (sahrdaran),¹⁴⁶ princes of the royal blood (waspuhragan), grandees (wuzurgan) and minor nobles/knights (azadan), who made up the elite mounted warriors of the Sassanid armies.¹⁴⁷ The grandees, as during the Arsacid era, were loaded with various honours and high positions at court to tie them to the central government. They were the viceroys, chilarchs and chiefs of cavalry and together with the princes of the blood (who were the sub-kings),¹⁴⁸ these select few families monopolised high appointments at court (somewhat reminiscent of the near monopoly of supreme political power and privilege in contemporary China by the 'blue-blood' descendants of ex-communist leaders).

This revived Persia, just like the revived China, first came to blows with Rome (cf. China's collision with the US during the Korean War (1950–3)) in a war that seriously embarrassed the then acknowledged superpower of the known-world. Under Shapur I (ca. 240–ca. 270 AD) the Sassanians inflicted one embarrassing defeat after another on the Romans in the 3rd century AD, the most famous Persian victory of all being the capture of Emperor Valerian in 260 AD¹⁴⁹ (recall the Chinese successes against the Americans during the often 'forgotten' Korean War). The Sassanian Persians were without a doubt Rome's most formidable opponent until the arrival of the Huns. The Sassanian military challenge (together with the pressure from the Sarmatian and Germanic barbarians along the Danube) was one of the causes for the excessive concentration of Roman military resources in the east, which placed imperial defences in the west at a comparative disadvantage.¹⁵⁰ When Rome's enemies in the west were disorganised Germanic tribes this was a manageable situation for the Roman Empire, but, as we have discussed earlier, when an Inner Asian Empire organised in a similar manner to the Parthian Empire, the Hunnic Empire, emerged in Europe, Rome could not hold its frontiers or avoid military collapse.

However, the re-emergence of Persia as a major geopolitical force and potential superpower in Western Eurasia was, as mentioned above, seriously jeopardised by the arrival of the White Huns (Kidarite and Hephthalite) in the mid-4th century, who forged an empire in Central Asia and in the former territories of the Kushans.¹⁵¹ Some of the territories seized by the White Huns were previously Sassanian territories that had been conquered by Persia from the declining Inner Asian Kushans in the preceding 3rd century AD. Shapur I had dissolved the Kushan Empire, but had allowed Kushan remnants to linger on in various capacities as Kushanshahs¹⁵² under Sassanian overlordship until the White Huns suddenly snatched away these conquests from Persia in the 4th century.¹⁵³ Just as the Soviets and the Chinese would quarrel over former Qing territories (Dzungaria and the Amur Basin) seized by the Russians (the Sino-Soviet War of 1969), the Sassanians would struggle with the White Huns who had seized their former eastern territories.¹⁵⁴

The geopolitical role played by the White Huns vis-à-vis Persia is actually pretty similar to the one played by the Soviet Union in relation to Communist China. The Chinese historical records mention the vast extent of the Hephthalite Hunnic Empire. *Liang Shu* 54 lists among their domains Persia, Kashmir, Karashahr, Kucha, Kashgar, and Khotan and *Bei Shi* 97: Kangju (Sogdia), Khotan, Kashgar

and Persia (vassalised¹⁵⁵).¹⁵⁶ More than 30 lands of the west are seen as being subject to the White Huns in our sources.¹⁵⁷

We have already examined above how successive Persian kings were in effect placed on the Persian throne by the White Huns.¹⁵⁸ This is somewhat reminiscent of how the Chinese Communist Party was heavily dependent on Soviet aid when they seized control of China. Sometime in the mid-5th century there occurred revolutionary changes within the White Hunnic state. The new dynasty of the Hephthalites displaced the previous reigning dynasty, the Kidarites, in all White Hunnic territories with the exception of Gandhara and India (recall the changing of the guard after the death of Stalin and the introduction of 'revisionism' by Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union). The Sassanian king Peroz, perhaps exploiting this turbulence within the White Hunnic Empire, tried to free himself from Hunnic domination (cf. Mao's denunciation of the 'revisionists' of the Soviet Union). Just as Mao would be defeated by the Soviets in 1969, Peroz was also defeated by a Hephthalite king called Akhshunwar by Tabari and Khushnavaz by Firdausi.¹⁵⁹

Peroz escaped death on that occasion (469 AD), but according to Procopius he was afterwards slain with most of his army in another encounter with the Huns (484 AD),¹⁶⁰ who then placed his son Kavad on the throne as a vassal king.¹⁶¹ To hold back the Huns the Persians ceased their hostilities against the Romans and concluded an unspoken and unacknowledged peace-cum-alliance (recall the virtual alliance with no strings attached that existed between the US and China during the latter half of the Cold War). The Hunnic pressure prevented the Persians from upsetting the Romans and vice versa the Romans the Persians. However, when the Hunnic threat receded from Europe with the break-up of Attila the Hun's mighty empire between 454 AD and 469 AD, the Romans gradually broke off the symbiotic relationship with the Persians and started to behave unilaterally and arrogantly towards the Persians (recall the US swagger after their victory in the Cold War during the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century).

Thus, when Kavad asked for loans from the East Roman government to strengthen defences against the common foe of both empires the Huns of Europe and also to pay off the huge tribute he owed to the White Huns in the east for helping him mount the Persian throne, the Romans in 502 AD bluntly refused his request. This slight was not forgotten and would eventually lead to renewal of ancient hostilities between the two empires.¹⁶² While the Persians were militarily at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the Romans due to the White Hunnic pressure in the east the Persians were willing to keep quiet and stomach the slights coming from Constantinople (just as the Chinese during the period of economic and military inferiority in relation to the US in the 1990s did little to retaliate against slights, intended or otherwise, from Washington, for instance the deliberate or accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis).

What is also interesting is the fact that the Sassanians, somewhat like the Chinese Communists, reinvented themselves after the Hunnic invasions (Sino-Soviet split, and the subsequent fall of the Soviet bloc) in an attempt to reinforce their weakened legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian people. Before the Hunnic period the Sassanians had legitimised their overthrow of the preceding Arsacids

and their usurpation of royal power by appealing to their military record against the Romans. Victory over the traditional aggressor (Rome), which had repeatedly sacked the Iranian capital of Ctesiphon in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD and against whom the Arsacids had been increasingly impotent, was held up as the legitimising standard of the Sassanian dynasty. This reminds us of course of the Communist propaganda that sought to legitimise the Communist takeover of China and the overthrow of the Guomindang government by emphasising the role of the Communists in repelling the 'imperialist' aggressors: Japan and America.

However, the embarrassing defeats suffered by the Sassanians at the hands of the Huns and the reality of the Sassanian king, having to defer and pay tribute to his Hunnic overlords seriously shook the very foundations of Sassanian legitimacy based on the notion of being the victorious defender of a superior Iran against foreign enemies.¹⁶³ This situation is also reminiscent of the state of China after the catastrophic failure of Maoism and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. The ideology of global revolution and struggle against the capitalist 'imperialists' and China's supposed primacy in that ideological struggle over all other competitors were exposed to have been wishful thinking, when Communism imploded and China had to accept junior/client status first in relation to the Soviets and then to the Americans. The spectacular failure of Communism/Maoism as a legitimising ideology left the Chinese Communists with a grave dilemma. With what should the party replace Maoism, even Marxism itself?

The Sassanian answer to a similar problem was to recast and rebrand their legitimacy by reinventing history. The Sassanians manipulated the traditional religion of Iran, Zoroastrianism to reinvent themselves as the legitimate descendants of the legendary Kayanian kings,¹⁶⁴ whom they argued were universal kings from whom even the Romans were ultimately derived. In a similar way, the Communist Party has attempted in recent years to rebrand itself as the legitimate heir to the traditional Confucian heritage of China's imperial past.¹⁶⁵ The Kayanid lineage served the purpose of instilling within the Persian population, especially the Parthian nobles who were artificially placed in the fictitious Kayanid descent system,¹⁶⁶ a sense of reverence for the dynasty and more importantly of promoting absolute obedience to the Sassanian ruler.¹⁶⁷ Equally, the readoption of an authoritarian version of Confucianism by the Communist Party has the similar purpose of instilling within the Chinese people a sense of 'respect' for authority (i.e. quiet subservience to the will of their rulers) and political obedience.

The tradition of the Kayanian kings was useful in promoting the ideology of a well-ordered, autocratic state. The tradition at every turn emphasised loyalty to the ruler and stressed the need to maintain a strict distinction between social classes, since discrimination was considered a necessary condition for a stable and orderly society. It was argued that class confusion and the elimination of class differentiation would undermine the social order. Discrimination was given the official stamp of approval and legitimised by being attributed to great antiquity.¹⁶⁸ Political dissenters like the Mazdakites were rejected as heretics and ruthlessly persecuted, since their doctrine, it seems, may have proposed the blurring of the distinction between classes of men.¹⁶⁹ We see almost a mirror image

of this Sassanian effort to stabilise their rule in the current Chinese Communist Party's attempts to impose their one party autocracy on the Chinese people. The elimination of one party rule, the Communists argue, would lead to social chaos and the break-up of China, and this state authoritarianism is made legitimate by being attributed to great antiquity and a 'national' tradition: Confucius and Confucianism. Just as the Sassanians persecuted the Mazdakite 'heretics', the Chinese communists have relentlessly suppressed democracy activists and other political dissenters.

The patriotic 'universalism' and 'nationalism'¹⁷⁰ of the Zoroastrian Kayanid lineage system is also echoed by the nationalist rhetoric that is often mixed together with the new 'Confucian' doctrine of the Communist Party. All of this is of course designed to prop up the legitimacy of the ruling establishment and prevent internal unrest. Within the universalising rhetoric of the Sassanians there was no place for the ethnic specificity of the Parthians. In the pseudo-history that the Sassanians articulated the Parthians and other regional/ethnic rulers became 'historical' 'Persians', who owed loyalty and obedience to the Kayanid house.¹⁷¹ In the same way in China the Manchus, Mongols and all other minorities in official rhetoric lost their specificity and became 'historically' 'Chinese' through Sinocentric, 'multi-ethnic' nationalism.

The destruction of the Hunnic Hephthalite Empire at the hands of the Turks in the mid-6th century AD that freed the military and economic resources of the Persians (which could now be concentrated in their western frontier with the Romans), brought about a resurgence of Persian power.¹⁷² The subsequent Persian conflicts with the Romans have already been discussed above. What is interesting though is the fact that a similar geopolitical situation has been offered to the Chinese. The Soviet Union fell apart due to internal problems (cf. the Turkish insurrection, the Rouran and the White Huns all formed a part of a wider Inner Asian imperial order that fell apart due to the Turkish revolt against the ruling hegemon of Inner Asia, the Rouran). This has created for the first time a chance for China to scale down its defences to the north and west (the traditional geopolitical threat to imperial China had always been the steppe region to the North and West) and divert its military and economic resources to its eastern frontier where, however, they are likely to collide with the US that dominates the maritime areas of East Asia. We have already seen what happened to Sassanian Persia that sought to contest the East Roman hegemony to the West. That misguided policy led to the total demise of the Persian state. Likewise, the idea of contesting the US hegemony in maritime East Asia, though attractive like the wealthy Syrian and Egyptian provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire, would be a serious mistake. But then into which region should China expand in order to satiate the increasingly vocal and vitriolic nationalist sentiments of the Chinese people? How is it possible to accommodate China's rise in power and urge to expand?

The answer can to some extent be found in what the Sassanians should have done. The Sassanian picked a fight they never should have started and exhausted their resources fighting the Byzantines. This led to their ultimate demise. Rather the Persians should have avoided conflict with the Romans and expanded in other

directions. They should have first of all firmly secured and then expanded their earlier conquests in the Arabian Peninsula and also South Asia. The conquest of the Hejaz and Yemen (the latter was in fact wisely occupied by Persia in order to cut off the flow of silk into Roman territory via sea-lanes connecting India and Yemen-Ethiopia which could effectively bypass Persia) would have given the Persians two critical advantages: 1) the complete domination of maritime trade routes (in addition to the land routes they already controlled) via which the silk trade from China was conducted; 2) the elimination of the Arab threat that would later undermine their empire. Further conquests in northwest India would have secured immensely rich provinces (at the expense of Hephthalite remnants now in disarray) and new sources of revenue at minimal cost and low risk of military reverses. This would have had the additional advantage of avoiding direct and costly collision with the Eastern Romans in the Roman sphere of political influence, while allowing Persia to take control of weakly defended major resource and trade centres.

For China that obvious weak, but lucrative region that can be dominated without colliding headlong with the US (which would be suicidal both militarily and economically), is Central Asia. Immense resources and also direct land access routes to Middle Eastern sources of energy, that would allow China to avoid excessive dependence on the vulnerable sea-lanes dominated by the US navy, could be secured with minimal losses and risks. But how is China to achieve this and fulfil its 'historic destiny' of becoming a superpower, which so many Chinese ardently desire? As the final concluding chapter will show, the Mongol Yuan precedent is probably the answer to realising China's ambitions, not the Ming example that has been cited by many critics, which seeks to turn the Chinese land power into a sea power. That would of course mean collision with the US, exactly the scenario that should be avoided.

Notes

- 1 See *Shiji* 110. For a detailed discussion on this subject see Chin (2010).
- 2 For a more detailed history of these events see Kim (2015), 19–26.
- 3 Luttwak (2009), 5–6, places far too great an emphasis on the success of East Roman diplomacy vis-à-vis the Huns. He is definitely correct in observing that the East Roman diplomatic finesse, when it comes to dealing with Pontic steppe peoples in later centuries, owes a lot to their earlier experience of dealing with the Huns. There was, however, no consistent or well-informed East Roman/Byzantine grand strategy in the 4th or 5th centuries AD. His observation that the Huns were geopolitically a qualitatively different and greater threat than the Germanic tribes to the Romans (pp. 20–36) is definitely correct. However, his dependence on earlier scholarship results in him placing too much emphasis on the person of Attila (who he seems to regard as the creator of Hunnic power).
- 4 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 31.
- 5 Zosimus 4. 34. 6.
- 6 Ambrose *Ep.* 24.8 (ed. PL 16, c. 1038). Alemany (2000), 31.
- 7 Thompson (1996), 30.
- 8 Williams and Friell (1994), 162.
- 9 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 52 ff.

- 10 Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 38.2, J-P Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 25. 356A; *Epistolae* 77.8.
- 11 Zosimus 5.26.4 (ed. Paschoud *CUF* 3, p. 39), Alemany (2000), 109–10.
- 12 Orosius *Hist.* 7.38.3; 7.40.3. (ed. Arnaud-Lindet *CUF* 3, p. 112, 118), Alemany (2000), 62–3.
- 13 Sozomon, *Ecclesiastical History* 9.5. See also Thompson (1996), 33–4.
- 14 Olympiodorus fr. 19 (*Bibl. Cod.* 80, 173), Blockley (1983), 182.
- 15 Prosper, *Epit. Chron.* 1322, ed. Mommsen *MGH AA* 9, p. 475; see also *Chron. Gall.* A 452, 118, ed. Mommsen, p. 660.
- 16 Croke (1977), 365–6.
- 17 Croke (1981), 167.
- 18 Priscus fr. 9.1, Blockley (1983), 235.
- 19 Priscus fr. 2; 9.3, Blockley (1983), 227, 238.
- 20 Marcellinus Comes, Croke (1995), 19.
- 21 Theophanes *Chron.* a.m. 5942.
- 22 Burgess (2001a), 80; Muhlberger (1990), 174. 100 cities says Callinicus, v. *Hypatius*, 139.21 ff., see Croke (1995), 88.
- 23 Theophanes *Chron.* a.m. 5942.
- 24 See Lee (2000), 41–2, and Whitby (2000c), 709.
- 25 Marcellinus Comes 447.2, Croke (1995), 19; Thompson (1948), 94.
- 26 Priscus, fr. 9.3 (*Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 3), Blockley (1983), 236–40.
- 27 Croke (1981), 163.
- 28 Williams and Friell (1994), 165.
- 29 Priscus, fr. 20, 1 (*Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 7), Blockley (1983), 304–6. The Priscan origin of this fragment is doubted by Christensen (2002), 340, on the grounds that its focus on Geiseric, thus Goths, and Honoria, smacks of Cassiodorus/Jordanes, not Priscus. He is definitely correct.
- 30 Malalas, xiv, p. 358; *Chron. Pasch.* i, p. 587. See also Priscus, fr. 21, Blockley (1983), 309 and Jeffreys et al. (trans.) (1986), 195.
- 31 Priscus, fr. 20, 3 (*Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 7), Blockley (1983), 306.
- 32 *Getica* 41.216.
- 33 Prosper a. 451, Murray (2000), 73.
- 34 For discussion on the Hunnic origin of Odoacer and his family see Kim (2013), 96–105.
- 35 See Ando (2009), 59–76, for the impact of Gibbon.
- 36 For more detailed discussion and speculations on the US' contemporary geopolitical situation see the analyses of Brzezinski (1997; 2012), Grygiel (2006), and Kaplan (2012).
- 37 For a full detailed treatment see the monumental work on the Roman-Sassanian wars in the Middle East between 226–363 AD by Dodgeon and Lieu (1991).
- 38 A detailed discussion of the geopolitical struggle between the Soviet Union and the US is out of place here. For a brief overview of the ways in which it mimics the Roman-Hun rivalry in the 4th and 5th centuries AD see the previous section.
- 39 For extended discussion on the history of the two halves of the Roman Empire in the late 4th and first half of the 5th centuries AD and the troubled relationship between the Eastern Empire and the Western Empire see Lee (2000), 33–62 and Blockley (1998), 111–37.
- 40 Hunnic mercenary service in the Roman payroll would occur as early as the beginning of the 5th century AD when Honorius employed an army of 10,000 Huns to attack Alaric. Thompson (1996), 54. As mentioned above, Aetius in 425 AD employed an army of 60,000 (!) Huns to support the usurper John against the forces of Theodosius II. The Huns would also participate in the destruction of the Burgundians in support of Aetius in 437 (Prosper, *Epit. Chron.* 1322, ed. Mommsen *MGH AA* 9, p. 475; *Chron. Gall.* A 452, 118, ed. Mommsen, p. 660) and again under Aetius defeat the Visigoths in 438 AD, Collins (2000), 113. A small contingent of this western expedition would

also aid Litorius against the Visigoths in 436 with success, relieving Narbonne. A later foray against the Visigoths in 439 AD, however, failed leading to the death of Litorius who, according to Salvian, put his trust in the Huns, while the Goths put theirs in God! See also Schutz (2000), 58, and Collins (1999), 82–4. Huns were also employed in the capture of Tibatto, the leader of the Bagaudae in 437 AD, Thompson (1996), 77–8.

- 41 Priscus, fr. 9.3 (*Exc. de Leg. Gent.* 3), Blockley (1983), 236–40.
- 42 Thompson (1996), 172–3.
- 43 For a counter-argument see Lee (2000), 41, 45.
- 44 Wickham (2009), 33.
- 45 Cameron (1993), 97.
- 46 No less than four embassies were sent by Attila to Constantinople after 447 AD, Croke (1981), 165.
- 47 Priscus fr. 9, Blockley (1983), 237. See also Croke (1983b), 297–308, for a discussion on this fragment. For the pressures imposed by Attila on imperial finances see also Lee (2000), 41.
- 48 Cameron (1993), 112.
- 49 Cameron (2012), 100.
- 50 The fiscal problems facing the Eastern Empire was exacerbated by the disastrous Vandal expedition of 468 AD which reputedly cost the empire a staggering 64,000 pounds of gold that virtually nullified the 100,000 pounds in surplus accumulated by the emperor Marcian in the previous decade, see Lee (2000), 45, 49. Both figures, which are rounded, are probably gross exaggerations aimed at magnifying the fiscal virtues of Marcian and the disastrous effects of the failure of the Vandal expedition, which was used as a pretext for eliminating Aspar and his Goths-Alans from political and military power in Constantinople.
- 51 Cameron (2012), 100. The emperor is reputed to have built up a massive reserve of 320,000 pounds of gold, a testament to his sound fiscal policies. He also managed to control inflation which had plagued the empire since the 4th century AD. See Lee (2000), 54–5.
- 52 Cameron (2012), 48.
- 53 Lee (2000), 61–2.
- 54 Cameron (2012), 88.
- 55 For Vandal naval raids against both halves of the Roman Empire see Rosen (2007), 136.
- 56 Proc., *Wars* IV. 5.8–9.
- 57 For a good summary of the major battles of the war see Haldon (2008), 33–42. See also Rosen (2007), 148–60, 269–85.
- 58 Cameron (2012), 117.
- 59 For a summary of the East Roman military campaign in North Africa under Belisarius see Rosen (2007), 137–41.
- 60 See Cameron (2001), 560, for the heavy costs involved in maintaining Eastern Roman rule in North Africa. Berber guerilla raids (cf. the Iraq insurgency), the revolt of the mutinous garrison in Africa (cf. the unreliability of the new Iraqi and Afghan armies set up by the Americans) all contributed to high costs.
- 61 For a full description of the immense damage done to the empire by this plague see Rosen (2007), 167–223, 261.
- 62 For a good summary of Justinian's wars of re-conquest and the over-extension of the empire's military resources see Luttwak (2009), 77–85. Luttwak points out quite correctly that the military successes of the Byzantines against the Vandals and the Ostrogoths were largely due to the tactical innovations introduced into the imperial army in imitation of Hunnic military practices (pp. 56–8). He however places the blame for the failure of Justinian's program of expansion on the pandemic that struck the empire (pp. 86–92) and not on the strategic blunders of the emperor who made the wrong geopolitical decision.

- 63 For an excellent analysis of Roman-Sassanian inter-relations see Drijvers (2009), 441–54.
- 64 Until this time Roman Syria had enjoyed what can only be described as a Golden Age, just like contemporary East Asia. Yet the insufficient military resources allocated to defending this incredibly rich province led to East Roman inability to effectively counter the Persian onslaught when it came. See Kennedy (2001), 591–3. See also Frye (1983), 155–6.
- 65 For a summary of the Persian campaign that sacked Antioch in 541 AD and the effects of the plague on the Persian Empire see Rosen (2007), 243–52.
- 66 Cameron (2012), 112–15; Drijvers (2009), 448.
- 67 Monophysite doctrines were espoused and expounded in the main by Syriac writers and speakers, while Chalcedonian Christianity found its popular support among the Greek speaking elite and in the cities. There was, therefore, a linguistic-ethnic divide that to a limited extent exacerbated the religious schism within the empire. Areas closest to the Persian frontier: Syria I, Euphratensis, Osroene and Mesopotamia were majority Monophysite. In contrast Syria II and the Phoenicius were mostly Chalcedonian. The Arab Ghassanids (Roman clients) and the great majority of Syriac-speaking monasteries and rural villages remained loyal to the parallel ecclesiastical hierarchy under the Jacobite patriarch based in the monastery east of Aleppo. See Kennedy (2001), 594, 599.
- 68 This division however was not uniform and not as acute as sometimes assumed, see Cameron (2012), 185–6, and Kennedy (2001), 599–600. The Syriac and Coptic churches were by no means entirely anti-Chalcedonian and ethnic friction was at its worst mild compared to more extreme cases of ethno-religious conflict in other historical contexts. Having said this we should also remind ourselves that when the Persians invaded the empire in 611 AD the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch wrote to colleagues in Alexandria that ‘the world rejoiced in peace and love, because the Chalcedonian night has been chased away’ (!), Kennedy (2001), 594. What mattered to an extent was not the opposition of the Syriac and Coptic Christians, who were at least outwardly neither nationalistic nor separatist in sentiment, and clearly wanted to live within an ‘Orthodox’ (by their definition) Christian empire, but rather the apathy and lack of enthusiasm that they felt for the cause of the empire when the critical Persian and later Arab invasions came. The lack of vigorous local resistance to the invaders and lack of active support for Roman restoration arguably contributed to the end of Roman hegemony in Western Eurasia.
- 69 Cameron (2012), 186.
- 70 There are of course also persecuted religious groups: the Christian House church movement, the Falun Gong, Dalai Lama etc.
- 71 See Cameron (2012), 188.
- 72 Although largely dismissed as a failure due to military reverses suffered early during his reign (in particular the embarrassing catastrophe of losing the fortress of Dara to the Persians) Justin II’s reign brought about the recovery of imperial finances and the strategically vital alliance with the Turks in Inner Asia, which forced the Sassanians to fight a war on two fronts, a new geostrategic reality that would prove decisive for the survival of the empire in the 7th century, see Whitby (2001), 88, 92, 94.
- 73 Whitby (2001), 96–7, 99.
- 74 See Kwanten (1979), 32–3.
- 75 Sinor (1990b), 301. For further discussion on the diplomatic contacts between the Turks, Byzantines and Sassanians see Frenkel (2005), 202–3.
- 76 Sinor (1990b), 302.
- 77 For a good analysis of the strategic significance of these embassies and the resulting East Roman-Turkish alliance see Luttwak (2009), 97–100.
- 78 Sinor (1990b), 303.
- 79 Which incidentally shows us quite clearly that the Inner Asian system of apportioning ‘fiefs’ to royal family members which we have seen among the Xiongnu-Huns,

Rouran etc. was also very much a feature of the Turkic system of governance. The Turks were the heirs to the Inner Asian political legacy and imperial aims of earlier steppe empires.

80 Sinor (1990b), 304.

81 Sinor (1990b), 306.

82 Cameron (2012), 189; Frye (1983), 164–6.

83 The misguided policy vis-à-vis the Avars had already begun during the reign of Justin II, who overturned the one sensible strategic decision made by his uncle Justinian: to pay off the Avars and avoid conflict on two fronts. By the time of Maurice the East Roman position in the Balkans was a precarious one, not really worth saving when considering the military and financial costs such a renewed offensive against the Avars would entail. Justin, however, for all his faults was correct in his decision to concentrate his military resources in the east to counter Persian aggression and also to balance against the Sassanids via an alliance with the Turkish Khaganate in Central Asia. For all the opprobrium directed at the emperor for his bad judgment, some clearly deserved, for instance his decision to discontinue the tribute to the Avars, his strategic decision to strengthen the alliance with the Turks in order to sandwich the Persian menace and concentrate on the east, while largely ignoring the inroads made by the Avars into the Balkans, paid dividends and forced the Persians during the early years of the reign of Maurice to concede superiority to the Romans, a reversal of the geopolitical situation during the reign of Justinian, when the Romans were clearly the inferior of the two empires in the east due to imperial overexpansion and waste of resources in Europe. See Cameron (2012), 193, Whitby (2001), 104–6, and Haldon (2008), 53.

84 The Avars had a powerful Hunnic element, as their ethnonym Var-Hun shows. See Czeglédý (1983), 107 ff. Many of the peoples who formed a part of their imperial confederation could also speak Hunnic (Oghuric Turkic). When the East Romans with Theognis negotiated with the Avar Khagan Bayan interpreters are said to have translated Greek into Hunnic to Bayan (Menander fr. 27.2, Blockley (1985), 239).

85 See Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae* 7, 7–8, ed. C. de Boor, 256, 23–262, 17, full text and translation in German in Haussig (1953), 281–90. Theophylact identifies the two leading tribes of the Ogurs (either the Hephthalite controlled Turkic tribes in Kazakhstan or members of the Tiele (Chile) tribal confederacy in the same region) as Var (Avars) and Khunni (i.e. Huns, see Haussig (1953), 347). The Rouran are thought by some scholars to be the most likely candidate for these Avars/Vars, since the dominant ruling tribe of their confederacy was probably in origin the Wuhuan which in Early Middle Chinese was probably pronounced Agwan, which due to the absence of the sound *r* in Early Middle Chinese was the contemporary rendering of Agwar or Avar. The Rouran (perhaps Avars), who may have originated in Inner Mongolia, were found in the vicinity of Dunhuang in close proximity also to Turpan when they begin their extraordinary rise under Shelun Khagan in the late 4th century, Christian (1998), 237. However, a case can also be made for identifying the Eurasian Avars with not the Rouran, but the Hephthalites whose ruling clan or tribe was called Hua. Pulleyblank (1983), 453, has shown that in Early Middle Chinese the name Hua was pronounced Var and he further suggests that these Var are identical with the above-mentioned Wuhuan, a branch of the Donghu confederation (including also the Xianbei (Serbi or Sirvi EMC) conquered by the Xiongnu/Huns in the 3rd century BC). See also Czeglédý (1983), 95. That the Var, the leading tribe of the Hephthalite White Hun Empire was in origin Wuhuan just like the Rouran seem to have corroborating evidence in the fact that the Hua, according to Chinese sources, were originally a vassal horde of the Rouran. See Enoki (1959), 1; Biswas (1973), 34; Golden (1992), 79–80. However, Professor La Vaissière in private correspondence with the author has suggested an alternative reading which would make Hua EMC for Ghor, a region of Afghanistan inhabited by the Hephthalites, rather than Var. The Hua-Hephthalites are

- taken by La Vaissière (2007), 121, as Oghuric Turkic Huns who were part of the earlier Hunnic migration wave in the 4th century AD, not the Avars or Vars who appear in the second half of the 5th century in Priscus. As of today there is no consensus on the transliteration of Hua in EMC and therefore no firm indicator of which of the two great Inner Asian empires, Rouran or Hephthalites, produced our European Avars.
- 86 See Bona (1976), 100–2, for an assessment of the armaments, composition and military power of the Avar armies. Heavy cavalry armed with Central Asian (Persian says Bona) cataphract armour, ‘East Asian’ single-edged cavalry sword and most significantly of all iron stirrup (the first introduction of this innovation in Europe), which allowed the armoured knight to add extra force to his lance thrusts and also freely use his composite bow, formed the core of this army. No contemporary western army, even that of the East Romans could beat this formidable force on the open plains. The Avar army of mounted warriors numbered just 20,000 men (Curta (2006), 62), but were supplemented by subject peoples such as the Bulgars who provided the bulk of the light cavalry (also mounted archers) and the various Slavs who made up the infantry (Bona (1976), 101). See also Szádeczky-Kardoss (1990), 211 for the Byzantine description of Avar military tactics and equipment in the *Strategikon*.
 - 87 Golden (1992), 109.
 - 88 Golden (1992), 111, and Szádeczky-Kardoss (1990), 207.
 - 89 Christie (1995), 58 ff.
 - 90 Whitby (2000c), 721; Liebeschuetz (2007), 114–20; Pohl (1988), 58–89. The Avar conquest stretched as far south as Athens, Corinth and the Peloponnese. See also Szádeczky-Kardoss (1990), 208–9 and Curta (2006), 69 and 109. In 584 AD the East Romans were forced to pay a tribute of 80,000 *solidi*, Theophylact 1.6.6. An Avar ruling elite would linger on in areas such as Greece until 805–6 AD, Szádeczky-Kardoss (1990), 215.
 - 91 Szádeczky-Kardoss (1990), 212, 457. The heterogeneous nature of the Avar Khaganate and even the Avar ethnos (if it existed as a distinct entity) is borne out by grave finds in Pannonia which show various ethnic types dressing and fighting in Avar style, but also with Germanic cultural traits, Christie (1995), 65–6.
 - 92 Maurice, *Strategikon* 1.2, 2.1, tells us that admiration for steppe warfare and tactics was widespread in the late 6th century AD, when the Romans imitated everything in the arsenal of their Hunno-Avar opponents from tents and flexible battle array to bows and armour. See Whitby (2000a), 310; Dennis (1984), 12–13. See Curta (2006), 66–7, for information on the Byzantine/ East Roman imitation of Avar-Hunnic stirrups in the *Strategikon*. See also Campbell (1999), 230. For the impact of Central Asian stirrups on later Medieval feudal armies in Western Europe see Bloch (1961), 153. Some residents of Constantinople in the 6th century went so far as imitating Hunnic dress as a mark of fashion. See Greatrex (2000), 276.
 - 93 Golden (1992), 100. In the western Balkans the Bulgars would penetrate as far south as the Isthmus of Corinth. See Whitby (2000c), 715. See also Liebeschuetz (2007), 112.
 - 94 Szádeczky-Kardoss (1990), 213, Pohl (1988), 248–55 and Fine (1983), 42–3. For more information on Avar invasions of the Eastern Roman Empire see Whitby (2000c), 720–21.
 - 95 For the civil war between the Avars and Bulgars over who would succeed to the office of Khagan see *Chronicle of Fredegar* Book 4.72, Wallace-Hadrill (1960), 60–61.
 - 96 For the fascinating possibility of links between the historical Kubrat and his five sons and the Croatian foundation legend of Chrobatos and his five brothers, see Grégoire (1944–5), 88–118. See also Pohl (1988), 265.
 - 97 Possibly derived from the five Tu-lu tribes that formed the eastern wing of the Western Turk Khaganate, see Sinor (1990b), 309.
 - 98 Curta (2006), 76–9. For a detailed history of the Ogurs, Onogurs and the Bulgars see Golden (2000), 286–9.

- 99 Pohl (2003), 574.
- 100 Cameron (2012), 195 and Whitby (2001), 100, 106.
- 101 For the best summary of the major events of the war see Howard-Johnston (2010), 436–45. See also Whitby (2001), 108, and Frye (1983), 167–70.
- 102 Howard-Johnston (2010), 439–40.
- 103 See Cameron (2012), 195. See also Luttwak (2009), 394–5.
- 104 Sinor (1990b), 308; Luttwak (2009), 403–4.
- 105 Sinor (1990b), 309.
- 106 Howard-Johnston (2010), 443.
- 107 Cameron (2012), 197; Howard-Johnston (2010), 444.
- 108 Much lauded by Byzantine writers obviously, see Howard-Johnston (2010), 25–6. Although any serious geostrategic observer would note that Heraclius and his empire was saved almost entirely by sagacious diplomacy (alliance with the Turks) and successful subversion (of Sassanian generals who were incited to rebel against the Sassanian central government), see Luttwak (2009), 408. It is perhaps no accident that later Arab historians regarded the war to have been lost for the Sassanians largely due to their own mistakes rather than the military prowess of the Byzantines.
- 109 For a good summary of the epic battle of the Yarmuk River that determined the fate of Eastern Roman Middle East see Haldon (2008), 58–65. See also Kennedy (2001), 610–11.
- 110 For an in-depth analysis of accounts of the Arab conquest of Egypt see Howard-Johnston (2010), 181–89. See also Cameron (2012), 199.
- 111 See Howard-Johnston (2010), 263, 299–306, 474–80, 489–95, 507–10.
- 112 Bivar (1983), 214; Litvinsky (1996), 139–40.
- 113 See also Agathias (4.27.3–4), Frendo (1975), 130.
- 114 Procopius 1.6.10; Theophanes, AM 5968, Mango and Scott (1997), 189–91.
- 115 Payne (2015), 287 and Litvinsky (1996), 140.
- 116 The longevity of the Sassanian state system and its impressive ability to weather the storms mentioned above suggest the existence of a systemic ‘strategy’ for maintaining the imperial order in the context of engagement and conflict with outside powers. This, together with the distinct geopolitical preferences of the Huns mentioned above, enabled the Sassanian state to accommodate/alleviate the effects of the geostrategic mistakes and ineptness of individual Sassanian rulers. For an excellent overview of this grand strategy of the Sassanian Empire see Howard-Johnston (2016).
- 117 For the Arab conquest of Persia which led to the defeat and death of the last Sassanian ruler Yazdegerd III (reigned 632–51/2) see Howard-Johnston (2010), 467–70.
- 118 Frye (1983), 175–6.
- 119 Dandamayev (1994), 35; Cook (1983), 4.
- 120 For the presence of a strong nomadic, pastoral element among the Persians see Hdt. 1.125; Cook (1983), 58.
- 121 Vogelsang (1992), 174–7, 305. See also Lubotsky (2002), 189–202, for direct Scythian influence on Old Persian via their intrusions into the Middle East. The seasonal migrations of the Achaemenid kings also appear distinctly Inner Asian and point to their steppe origins. See Tuplin (1998), 63–114.
- 122 See Cook (1983), 62, 64, 260.
- 123 Cook (1983), 76, 152.
- 124 Vogelsang (1992), 244, 311–14, hence the title King of Kings borne by the Achaemenid kings.
- 125 Cribb (1991), 42.
- 126 Colledge (1967), 24–5. For more information on the Inner Asian origins of the Parthians see Sarianidi (1998), 22–3.
- 127 Strabo (11.7.1, 508C; 11.82, 511C). Pourshariati (2008), 19, Alonso-Núñez (1988–9), 133–4, and Wolski (1993), 37–51.
- 128 Colledge (1967), 28 ff. and Wolski (1993), 79 ff.

- 129 See Curtis (2007), 11. The Tochari were in all probability the Yuezhi or included the Yuezhi mentioned in our Chinese sources, Beckwith (2009), 380–3.
- 130 For the military reforms under Mithradates II (123–88 BC) and the abandonment of Seleucid, Mediterranean type armaments in favour of Inner Asian, steppe military institutions see Colledge (1967), 65.
- 131 See Olbrycht (1998), 32 and Colledge (1967), 35, for the involvement of the Sacaraucae and other Saka in the enthronement of Sinatruces and also their meddling in Parthian affairs during the reigns of Phraates IV, Artabanus II and Gotarzes II. See also Bivar (2007), 29. For the impact of Scythian or rather Saka steppe concepts and culture on the Parthians see Invernizzi (2007), 168–70.
- 132 See Colledge (1967), 37–43.
- 133 See Koshelenko and Pilipko (1994), 145.
- 134 Bivar (2007), 28. See also Wolski (1993), 89 and Koshelenko and Pilipko (1994), 133.
- 135 Plutarch, *Crassus* 24. 1. Bivar (2007), 29, Wolski (1993), 90 and Colledge (1967), 62. For the later involvement of the Suren family in Parthian politics and also in India, e.g. the career of Abdagases, see Bivar (2007), 32–4.
- 136 The origins of heavily armoured cavalry (the mounted knights of Medieval legends) are probably to be found in the Central Asian steppe among possibly the Sarmatians. See Tacitus's description of cataphract Sarmatian aristocracy, *Hist.* 1.79.1–4.
- 137 See Wolski (1993), 103. Slaves according to Plutarch and Justin, but actually indicative of dependent population or peasants who are subject to great landowners or quasi-feudal lords, i.e. closer to medieval serfs than to the Classical model of slaves.
- 138 Rubin (2000), 638.
- 139 Pourshariati (2008), 37. See also McDonough (2011), 298–9.
- 140 Pourshariati (2008), 3.
- 141 McDonough (2011), 295–6.
- 142 Rubin (2000), 653.
- 143 Pourshariati (2008), 63.
- 144 Pourshariati (2008), 8.
- 145 Daryaei (2009), 46.
- 146 Rubin (2000), 653, usually senior members of the royal dynasty.
- 147 Rubin (2000), 653.
- 148 McDonough (2011), 300.
- 149 For the early Sassanian military successes against Rome see Frye (1983), 125–7.
- 150 Brown (1971), 20.
- 151 For the rise of the Kushans in Central Asia and Afghanistan see Grenet (2006), 339–40, Puri (1994b), 248–9 and Hill (2009), 29, 329–32.
- 152 See Litvinsky, Shah and Samghabadi (1994), 479–80. See also Hill (2009), xxi.
- 153 Narain (1990), 169.
- 154 Frye (1983), 146–50.
- 155 More on this shortly.
- 156 See La Vaissière (2007), 125, and also discussion on the extent of the Hephthalite state in Biswas (1973), 25.
- 157 Kollautz and Miyakawa (1970), 98.
- 158 Kollautz and Miyakawa (1970), 102 and Christian (1998), 220.
- 159 Bivar (1983), 214; Litvinsky (1996), 139–40.
- 160 Procopius 1.3.1–22; 1.4.1–14. See also Frye (1983), 148, and Rubin (2000), 642. Agathias 4.27.3–4, Frendo (1975), 130, provides much the same information and emphasizes that the Hephthalites are a Hunnic people.
- 161 Frye (1983), 149.
- 162 Procopius 1.7.1–3.
- 163 Yarshater (1983), 402–3, the national history of the Sassanians and the Kayanian legends were reshaped to address these pressing contemporary concerns.
- 164 For the legend of the Kayanian kings see Yarshater (1983), 366–77.

- 165 The profusion of Confucius institutes around the world with active official backing and funding from the ruling communist party highlights the increasing tendency in Beijing to identify the party with the imperial tradition of the 'Confucian' dynasties that had previously governed China.
- 166 In fact, the Kayanian legends may originally have been spread by the Arsacids, before being appropriated by the Sassanians, see Yarshater (1983), 390. This is of course reminiscent of how the Confucian imperial tradition had likewise been adopted by the Inner Asian Qing dynasty before the Communist Party itself likewise decided to follow in their footsteps.
- 167 Yarshater (1983), 397, 403–4.
- 168 Yarshater (1983), 397.
- 169 Yarshater (1983), 406.
- 170 Yarshater (1983), 405, 408–11.
- 171 Yarshater (1983), 459.
- 172 Frye (1983), 153.

4 Conclusion

The geostrategic choices for the future

4.1 China as the geopolitical equivalent of the great Turco-Mongol Empires of Eurasia

Yuan dynasty or Ming dynasty? Or perhaps even the Ottomans? What geostrategic precedent should China's policymakers follow? Many of China's strategists today have advocated for naval expansion and have associated great power or superpower status with the domination of the high seas. This line of thinking, which derives ultimately from the strategic thinking of the American navy admiral Mahan, may seem self-evident to some given the preponderant weight given to sea power by the so-called global powers of the past 500 years: Portugal, Spain, Holland, Great Britain and the US. Of these five only the US actually deserves the title of hegemonic global power. Portugal and Holland, while the reach of their 'power' or rather trading-pirate activities was to some extent 'global', were never strong enough to dominate or even hope to match the military might of the major Eurasian continental powers in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries AD (the Ottomans, Safavid Iran, Moghul India, Ming and Qing China, and the Habsburg Empire). For all the wealth that maritime trading activity (or rather looting on a colossal scale)¹ and colonisation of under-developed or militarily vulnerable regions of the world generated, only Spain in the 16th–17th centuries and Britain in the 18th–early 20th centuries managed to accumulate the power that was needed to briefly compete as military equals with the major Eurasian land powers.

Yet, even imperial Spain and Britain were hardly the strongest military powers of their time and neither could be classified as the paramount global hegemon like the US of today.² True, because of the continental preoccupations of most of the Eurasian land powers Portugal and Holland by concentrating most of their resources on their naval strength, were able to at times inflict naval defeats on some of these continental empires, e.g. the Ottoman-Portuguese Indian Ocean rivalry which ended in Portugal's favour due to Ottoman preoccupations elsewhere.³ However, the power of these maritime states measured in terms of military strength (both land forces and navy) and economic wealth, was not sufficient to dominate or even seriously disrupt the decision-making processes of the major Eurasian titans. They were for the most part regarded as annoying nuisances on the coastal fringes of continental empires and rarely anything more.

Although the geographic dimensions of the British Empire at its height was certainly impressive and its economic wealth was without doubt greater than that of its contemporary rivals, the power of the British in comparison to the Eurasian continental powers during the 19th and early 20th centuries, despite their overwhelming naval advantage, was also not as great as it seemed. Britain by itself could hardly fight and hope to win a successful land war against any of these four powers: Imperial Russia, the United States, Imperial Germany and France. Any one of these could defeat the British on land. Although their naval strength was relatively weaker than that of the British, they were without a doubt superior on land. A coalition that united any two of these land powers had the potential to destroy Britain's 'empire', which was in reality a motley collection of poorly defended, far scattered possessions on the fringes of Afro-Eurasia that, with the important exception of India (an impressive imperial possession), was easily acquired by suppressing primitively armed native populations fighting with stone-age weapons (the Aborigines of Australia, the American Indians in Canada, the Maori of New Zealand, and the Bushmen of South Africa) and sustained largely by settling docile and loyal British colonists (with the glaring exception of the rebellious American colonies) in many of these places, again with the exception of the Indian subcontinent.

In other words, as stated above, for all its grandeur and imperial opulence, Imperial Britain can hardly be called a global hegemon. It was perhaps for a while the economically dominant power, but never the dominant power militarily or even politically. Its success was always balanced by the equally formidable, if not more formidable, military power of its European and American rivals. Even the might of the US, for all its impressive global reach and ability to exert pressure on virtually every corner of the globe, is not entirely without limits. Its Achilles heel has always been the weakness (relative to its navy) of its ground forces.

Was America really superior to the Soviet Union or even Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan on land? These are questions that cannot be quickly answered. However, it must be acknowledged that US power is far more formidable than the ephemeral so-called 'hegemony' of previous maritime powers. It is that much more formidable because US military power is a combination of an unmatched naval capacity and a potent land force (which although not overwhelmingly superior to other ground forces can at least match them and usually defeat them in an all-out war of attrition due to America's greater economic and human resources). Such a unique balance was missing in the previous four navy-based powers of the last 500 years.

Therefore, hegemonic power cannot be measured solely in terms of just naval capacity and naval supremacy, even if attained, does not promise unchallenged global or even regional dominance. Only a power that possesses overwhelming superiority in both elements, land and sea, or leads a coalition that possesses that potential can be a truly global hegemonic power. In China's case, building up a navy that can rival that of the US is a distant prospect. The best that can realistically be hoped for is possessing a fairly strong navy that is capable of protecting the nation's merchant fleet and also vital trade/energy supply routes against lesser

dangers. However, any attempt to militarily overtake the US at sea is likely to provoke a harsh response from Washington and China will then potentially be faced with the severance of its vital trade and energy supply routes, which its navy will not be able to defend against the more powerful US navy.

Thus, rather than provoke such an outcome and fight a conflict that China cannot hope to win by itself, China should set a clear limit to its current naval build-up (so as to not unduly alarm Washington) and instead focus on building a coalition that can guarantee the preservation of its status as a great power and perhaps later in a more favourable geopolitical context help propel it to 'hegemonic' power. To realise this China should closely examine the geopolitical example set by the Mongol Yuan Empire under Temur Khagan and his successors, who in the 14th century established a continental Eurasian alliance of related Chinggisid empires. The Yuan exerted substantive influence on and exercised direct hegemony over the Central Asian Chagatai Khanate, which constituted the key link to markets and resources in the Middle East, India and Europe. It also exercised a very loose hegemony over Ilkhanid Iran and Golden Horde Russia. It will be argued that a similar approach must be adopted by China, a more hands-on approach to draw Central Asia firmly into the Chinese sphere of influence (but not threatening the political independence of Central Asian states, just as the Yuan tolerated Chagatai independence under Yuan hegemony). This should be combined with a looser mutually beneficial system of Eurasian alliance with the modern geopolitical heirs of the Mongol Khanates: Iran and Russia. Such an alliance system will secure for China direct, unthreatened access to key energy and resource producing regions (Middle East, Central Asia and Russia), while allowing it to avoid direct conflict with the US and thereby preserve critical trade relations with the West which is essential for China's economic build-up. The combined power of this Eurasian bloc will eventually also prevent the continuation of the current status quo of US hegemony, without needing to place China at substantial risk. Meanwhile, the scaling down of naval aggression in East Asia (the South China Sea and East China Sea) will allay East Asian fears of Chinese domination and weaken the possibility of a US led anti-China coalition from forming.

The arguments made by scholars such as Grygiel and some Chinese policy experts that advocate a strong naval expansion in imitation of Ming precedents (or even Yuan under Khubilai, who wasted valuable resources on pointless naval expeditions against Japan, Vietnam and Java, all of which ended in failures), will be shown to be seriously misguided. The suggestion that the Ottoman Empire failed and declined as an empire due to its lack of a strong navy in the Indian Ocean and that China should learn from the Ottoman example, will also be countered. It will be argued that the Ottomans failed not because of the inadequacies of their navy, but because they dispersed their military resources and wasted valuable time and energy on expanding into a rich, but crowded and dangerous neighbourhood: Central Europe (where the Habsburgs, Poland, Venice and the Russians blunted their expansion by forming an anti-Ottoman coalition). It will be demonstrated that this is exactly what will happen to China if it seeks to expand into the crowded and dangerous area of East Asia. Rather, just as the Ottomans

should have focused on conquering Persia and thereby securing direct land access to the key resource producing areas and markets (India and China), China of today should likewise focus its attention and resources on forming a wider Eurasian alliance that can potentially propel it to the status of superpower.

The Mongols (Yuan dynasty) ruled over the largest contiguous land empire in history. During the heyday of the Mongols, no other regional power could hope to match the Mongols in power and magnificence. We are all familiar with the legendary tales concerning the splendour of Xanadu and the court of the mighty Khubilai Khan. However, from a geopolitical point of view, the rise of the Mongol Empire was the culmination of the almost millennium-long process of integration of most of Eurasia under the leadership of the Turco-Mongols. The Mongols, by achieving hegemony over continental Eurasia, achieved dominance over the known world. If China holds ambitions to attain the position of global hegemon, I would argue that the example of the Yuan Mongols must be observed very carefully and actively imitated.

By this I am not suggesting that the Chinese should imitate Chinggis Khan and invade Central Asia, Russia and Iran. That would not only be foolhardy, but also suicidal. What I am suggesting is that they should take a closer look at the reigns of Khubilai (the first Mongol ruler to reign over all China) and his successor Temur. For all the magnificence attributed to Khubilai and his reign, the reign of the first emperor of the Yuan saw the near complete breakdown of Mongol unity and the near dissolution of the pan-Eurasian Empire of the early Chinggisid Khagans. Khubilai concentrated his attention on conquering the Southern Sung and after this was achieved he wasted valuable resources on useless campaigns to exert his authority over Vietnam, Japan, Burma and Java, none of which were a geopolitical threat or even concern of the Yuan. All these costly campaigns brought at worst humiliation and at best mixed results (as in the case of Burma, which was temporarily conquered, but then slipped out of Yuan control). Due to these distractions Khubilai allowed the control of the wider Chinggisid Eurasian Khaganate to slip through his fingers. As Rossabi points out, Khubilai's policy towards Central Asia, the region that was geographically the key to maintaining the hegemony of the eastern Khanate over the other Mongol khanates in the west, suffered from a general lack of interest from the Khagan. Khubilai treated the challenge from Khaidu and allied Chagatais in Central Asia as merely a peripheral concern and as a consequence lost his hegemony over Mongol Eurasia.⁴ Only late during his reign when Khaidu invaded Mongolia itself and threatened to link up with Borjigin rebels under Nayan in Manchuria did Khubilai belatedly react with tough action. The military campaign that eventuated was costly and prolonged due to again a lack of focus and misguided war aims (the complete subjugation of the rebels, rather than divide and rule diplomacy aimed at the restoration of suzerainty over the Chagatai at the expense of Khaidu, something that Temur Khagan would later successfully achieve).

Khubilai, as the new emperor of the whole of China, inherited from the Southern Sung a powerful navy that had no equal in the world⁵ and this tempted him to exploit this naval arm to achieve suzerainty over island states

and southeast Asian kingdoms that had traditionally been beyond the scope of Chinese imperial rule. These efforts drained the empire's coffers and eventually by the end of the reign brought about acute fiscal problems.⁶ Khubilai's successor Temur, who is rarely given credit for the successes that he achieved, reversed the erroneous geopolitical decisions of his grandfather and concentrated Yuan power on restoring the hegemony of the Great Khanate over Mongol Eurasia. As soon as he mounted the throne Temur recognised Vietnam as a tributary and ceased all efforts to militarily conquer the country and he also rejected any renewal of efforts to invade Japan in 1298.⁷ These were both very wise decisions and instead of wasting valuable resources in northeast Asia and southeast Asia, Temur concentrated his attention on Central Asia and brought about the defeat of Khaidu, the surrender of his successor Chapar, and the restoration of Yuan suzerainty over the Chagatai Khanate (then under the rule of Duwa Khan). By 1304 the nominal suzerainty of the Yuan over all Mongol Khanates in Eurasia was restored, a remarkable military and diplomatic success.⁸ This Eurasian unity and cooperation through Chinggisid dynastic fraternity was in general maintained by Temur's successors and persisted until the 1330s. Tugh-Temur Khagan for instance maintained excellent relations with all three Mongol western Khanates as the nominal suzerain and overlord. The mid-Yuan emperors achieved this feat by adhering to the policy of non-intervention and cooperation, emphasising alignment and association.⁹

This is exactly the model that suits the interests of the current Chinese communist government. Non-intervention in internal affairs is the keystone of current Chinese international relations policy and co-option by economic and political association and alignment (with authoritarian states in Central Asia, Russia and Iran), is the best means by which to achieve a pan-Eurasian Chinese hegemony, just like the Yuan achieved theirs via a mixture of ideology (Chinggisid dynastic fraternity: authoritarian dictatorship) and adherence to the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other Chinggisid khanates. The earlier policy of active military engagement proved costly¹⁰ and the mid-Yuan rulers from Temur onwards, after the demonstration of power had led to peace with the Chagatais, refrained from further acts of military aggression. China should likewise take note and refrain from militarily threatening the independence of the Central Asian republics. Rather it should position itself as the guarantor of the existing status quo and co-opt Central Asian autocracies as China's ideological and socio-economic satellites.

Some may then contest this thesis and argue that Yuan suzerainty over Eurasia proved brief and ephemeral in the end and broke down again after the 1330s. This is true of course, but that was not due to any geopolitical errors or mistakes made by the mid-Yuan emperors. The policy was sound and a resounding success. However, the same could not be said of the internal policies of the mid-Yuan emperors. The breakdown of Eurasian unity and the end of pan-Eurasian Mongol hegemony were in a sense merely by-products of the collapse of Mongol rule in China and elsewhere due to a highly complex combination of factors: corruption, mismanagement of finances,¹¹ mismanagement of minorities,¹² and above all

natural calamities (the bubonic plague and the sudden disastrous change in the course of the Yellow River, which no government in the Middle Ages could possibly have managed).¹³ In other words, internal problems, not external pressure or failures doomed the Yuan regime. Natural calamities, political instability resulting from power struggles amongst the elite, and ethnic and religious revolts brought down the mighty edifice that had once governed most of Eurasia.¹⁴ The fate of the Yuan Mongols is informative. That all these internal problems: corruption, ethnic and religious unrest (Tibet and Xinjiang, repression of House churches and the Falun Gong), fiscal problems (economic slowdown), power struggles among the communist 'aristocrats' (the Bo Xilai incident and the ongoing factional disputes within the Communist Party), are of acute concern also to the Communist Party is an understatement. The other major reason why China should not challenge the US in East Asia and Southeast Asia, is because all these internal problems are a greater menace to the ruling elite of China than any foreign pressure. The Yuan Mongols, who had no rival to speak of, still collapsed due to and only due to internal problems. What more is there to say about China with many, many more rivals, some of whom are even stronger or nearly equal to China in strength (the US and Japan)? China would be wise to avoid clashing with these foreign powers when it is abundantly clear that its internal problems dwarf the problems faced by most normal countries around the world.

For some, however, a return to the days of the Ming (not the Yuan) when China ruled the waves is a seductive chant. Grygiel has argued that the Ming decline relative to European powers in the early modern era was due largely to its retreat from the sea and domination of sea-lanes in Asia that passed instead to the Europeans. According to him the abandonment of the sea merely gave the Western maritime powers the means to build up their wealth and later challenge China, but he neglects to emphasise that China too benefited economically from European involvement in the trans-Indian and later trans-Pacific sea-borne trade. In any case, he argues that it was the policy of continental closure that doomed the Ming and led to the decline of the power of China (stagnation in terms of technological advancement and isolation from the cultural and commercial dynamism of the world market).¹⁵ Grygiel skirts over the disastrous consequences of China's naval expeditions abroad during the Yuan dynasty (to Java and Japan)¹⁶ and instead reiterates the argument that concentrating all efforts on fortifying China's land borders will not lead to gains in relative strength for China and praises the Ming's aggressive stance towards Southeast Asia during the reign of the Yongle emperor.¹⁷

He notes that the Ming combined the military policies of both the Southern Sung and the northern Sung, a vast infantry force to contain enemies to the north, northeast and west and a fleet to expand towards the sea routes to the south.¹⁸ For Grygiel, this policy in the end proved a mistake, since the Chinese emperors due to their concerns regarding the protection of their land borders were forced to scale down their navy. In other words, they made the wrong geostrategic decision to concentrate exclusively on land at the expense of maintaining control over the seas.

Although I agree in principle with Grygiel that the complete abandonment of naval endeavours into the South China Sea was an error, it does not follow therefore that the Ming were mistaken to concentrate more on land at the expense of their naval fleets. Grygiel underestimates the gravity of the crisis of 1448 when the reigning Ming emperor was taken prisoner by the Mongols.¹⁹ The memory of Khitan, Jurchen and then Mongol conquests of China were still very much alive vividly in the minds of China's governing elite in the 15th century and it is difficult to see how else they could have reacted to such a crisis. Indeed the Ming was toppled not by an invasion from the sea, but by the same northern Inner Asian invaders who had conquered the Sung dynasty, the Jurchen-Manchus. It would have been a ludicrously suicidal move to continue to build up the fleet and spend precious economic and military resources on naval expeditions at a time when the empire's very survival on land was at stake. True, the navy should not have been scrapped entirely and should have been maintained at a certain level in order to enable the continued monitoring of vital trade routes to the south. However, for the Ming an aggressive naval policy between the mid-15th–mid-16th centuries was militarily and economically out of the question.²⁰

The romantic image of Zhenghe exploring the world decades before the Europeans²¹ should not divert us from the reality of the geopolitical situation that China faced at the time. The main threat was to the north and northeast and the Ming had to respond accordingly. If anything, the biggest geopolitical error made by the Ming was not the abandonment of the naval programme, but of not pursuing the war in the north more aggressively. The Ming government fell into lethargy and just maintained a defensive posture that allowed Ming armies to decay and suffer repeated defeats at the hands of the Mongols. Furthermore, the situation for modern China is not the same as that for the Ming in the 15th century. In the 15th century there was no major power(s) except for the fragmented Mongols (divided into the Chinggisid Mongols in the east and the Oirat Mongols to the west) to check and balance Chinese efforts at regional dominance. Yet, China of the 21st century lives in a much more crowded neighbourhood. It faces formidable geopolitical rivals that would react violently to any Chinese naval/land expansion into the east or the south. Firstly, Japan (a power still nearly equal to China in strength and far more active in foreign affairs than the dysfunctional Muromachi Shogunate during the days of Yongle). Secondly, India (a rising power to China's southern flank, again far more imposing and threatening to any Chinese ventures into the Indian Ocean than the largely powerless Delhi Sultanate which had in 1399 been pillaged by Timur's Turco-Mongols and the smaller southern Indian kingdoms encountered by the Ming during the early 15th century). Lastly, of course, the US (a geopolitical heavyweight that can still overpower China, the likes of which never existed during the days of the Ming). Even the old peripheral states on the margins of Chinese influence are no longer as weak as they used to be during Ming times. Modern Vietnam is arguably a far bigger military nuisance to China than the Vietnam invaded by Yongle, which included only the northern third of today's Vietnam.²² Korea, which in the days of the Ming was a docile Ming vassal in the throes of Sinophilia,²³ is today (South Korea) a very different

country, stronger both in economic and military terms than the Chosun dynasty and potentially hostile to China if China were to seek to expand east. Therefore, any serious avenues for expansion to the east and south are closed for China, at least for the foreseeable future.

Any aggression to the east and south will only succeed in galvanising a coalition against China and strengthen the US' comparative advantage over Chinese military and naval deficiencies by driving potential allies into opposition against perceived Chinese expansionism and renewed imperialism. Thus, to some extent China's geostrategic situation resembles not that of the Ming, but the geostrategic dilemma of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. The mighty Ottoman Empire of the 16th century was a state that was approaching the apogee of its power. However, due to poor geostrategic decisions made by the Sultans and their viziers during that century the empire began its steady at first and then from the late 17th century onwards irreversible decline. Grygiel again offers some useful insights.

He argues that the Ottomans did not become a genuine sea power and concentrated on territorial aggrandisement in Europe than maritime control. Thus, the Ottomans never became a naval power equal to Spain, Portugal, and later the UK or even Venice he argues. The sultan's fleets did terrorise the Mediterranean coasts of Europe, but they failed to dominate that sea and more importantly the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and the geopolitical situation of the empire tells us why this was so. Grygiel claims that the most important centres of resources for the Ottomans were located in Europe and in the far east of their empire. Both Venice in the Mediterranean and the European maritime states coveted the same resources and the Ottomans in order to increase their relative power had to expand into Europe and also at the same time Asia to control resources and trade routes. However, according to Grygiel the Ottomans were constrained in their quest for control of resources and routes by their continental location.

Despite daring forays into the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean the Ottoman state was severely hampered by its long and unstable land frontiers. It was thus forced to concentrate resources on maintaining its borders rather than expanding into non-contiguous areas, i.e. overseas colonies. The Ottomans had to relegate their maritime ambitions to the realm of pretensions. Another reason for Ottoman failure to become a naval power and therefore eventually decline, according to Grygiel, was because the Mediterranean, the sea into which it concentrated what it could afford in terms of naval power, was already geopolitically passé. The discovery of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean routes had undermined its importance. The Ottoman ability to redirect its geostrategy was thus severely hampered by its geography (a land based power that limited Ottoman options when dealing with geopolitical changes).²⁴

The Ottoman Empire of the 16th century that Grygiel describes, the land-based empire that supposedly, according to him, failed to adapt to geopolitical changes due to its geographical location, had several features that reminds us of modern contemporary China. Like the China of today the Ottomans lived in a crowded neighbourhood, especially to the west and north: the formidable Habsburg monarchy blocking their expansion into central Europe, and the powerful Poland-Lithuania

and the rising Tsardom of Russia negating any prospects of them expanding substantially to the north. To the east there was the temporarily weakened Safavid state of Persia (somewhat reminiscent of the temporarily weakened Russia to the west of China). For the past 1,000 years Anatolia, the power base of the Ottoman Empire, had constantly been on the receiving end of invasions originating in Persia or further east.

For the first time in almost a millennium there was a momentary power vacuum for the Ottomans to exploit in the east, just as the demise of the Soviet Union has left a power vacuum in Central Asia and Mongolia from where previously, for almost a millennium, military threats to China originated. This is also reminiscent of the geopolitical situation faced by Sassanian Persia in the 6th and 7th centuries AD, when the fall of the Hephthalite Hun Empire and the slow subsequent break-up of the Turkish Khaganate, if exploited properly, could have led to Persian dominance in Central Asia and the once in a millennium opportunity to directly tap into the wealth of India and China by completely dominating the Silk Routes to the east.

In other words, the logical place to expand into for both Sassanian Persia and the China of today was/is the same region: Central Asia where the resources were and in the case of the Ottomans Persia, which was in the middle of the 16th century severely weakened due to the defeat it had sustained at the hands of the Ottomans at Chaldiran and was further handicapped by invasions from the steppes in the form of the Uzbeks.

Grygiel is right to point out that the Mediterranean into which the Ottomans poured in their limited naval resources was a spent-force economically in the 16th century with the discovery of new trade routes. The Indian Ocean was indeed far more important. However, again, as Grygiel rightly points out, due to the constraints put on the Ottomans by their expansive land borders to the west and north, which needed to be protected, the Ottomans failed to reinforce their Indian Ocean fleet sufficiently to prevent the choking of their lifeline to the trade emporia in East and South Asia. Yet, although Grygiel is probably correct to point out that there were geopolitical constraints that hindered Ottoman naval expansion, he is wrong to attribute this primarily to geography that limited the Ottoman government's strategic options.

I agree with Grygiel that the Ottoman expenditures of men and resources in the Mediterranean were useless due to the geopolitical shifts of the 16th century that moved the keys to economic prosperity away from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans.²⁵ I also agree with his assessment that the Portuguese dominance of the Indian Ocean threatened to sever connections between the Ottomans and the Asian markets and thus no longer could Ottoman geostrategy focus exclusively on Europe and the Mediterranean to sustain the empire's power.²⁶ The failure of the Ottoman attempts to oust the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean,²⁷ the unreliability and intermittent nature of the land connections between the Ottomans and the rest of the Asian market,²⁸ and the final closing of the old trade routes between Ottomans and Asia by England and the Dutch, threw the Middle East into an economic depression that also led to the

decline of the Ottomans.²⁹ However, I disagree with Grygiel on his assertion that Central Europe and the Danubian provinces were necessary for the empire's survival and that continued expansion in this direction was a geopolitical necessity.

Grygiel is right to point out that in the mid-16th century the revenue from Anatolia was only three quarters of that from the Balkans while Egypt supplied even less.³⁰ There can be no doubt that the loss of access to the riches of Asia due to the Portuguese-Dutch-English control of the trade routes in the Indian Ocean coupled with the Ottoman loss of Central Europe, their other main source/route of resources and wealth, in the 17th century doomed the Ottoman Empire to decline.³¹ However, this very situation, reliance on the maintenance of control over Central European resources in a volatile and dangerously crowded geopolitical neighbourhood, could have been avoided through geostrategic decisions in the 16th century. Grygiel argues that the Ottomans failed to control the geopolitical situation developing in the 16th century due to the constraints imposed on them of having to defend their northern border and the constraints of being a land power. In other words, the Ottomans were overstretched. However, the geographical determinism of his argument is contentious and there were in fact very reasonable ways through which the Ottomans could have extricated themselves from entanglement in Central Europe and the Mediterranean and concentrated their attention on the more easily attainable objectives in the east.

Central Europe somewhat like maritime East Asia for China of today was a tempting target for the Ottomans. It offered great wealth (like East Asia) and also provided the Sultans with the means of bolstering their legitimacy before their Muslim subjects by engaging in Jihad against the infidel (just as sabre-rattling and show of strength in the South China Sea and in the East China Sea enhances the prestige and legitimacy of the Communist Party as the custodians of China's national pride). However, just as China has to face daunting and potentially life-threatening opposition in East Asia should it seek to act aggressively in this region, the Ottomans also had to operate in Central Europe against formidable opposition: the Habsburgs, the Poles and the Russians. Individually, one-on-one, the Ottomans had a chance of engaging and defeating each of these enemies, just as China has a clear chance to overwhelm East Asian opponents, if the enemy is isolated. However, the threat of Ottoman conquest of the whole of Central Europe brought together a formidable coalition against the empire in the 1680s and 1690s (Holy Roman Empire, Russia, Poland and Venice). The result was the disaster at Vienna (1683) and the humiliating treaty of Karlowitz (1699) that forever ended Ottoman pretensions to world power and relegated it to the status of the sick man of Europe. If China adopts the same aggressive tactics against its Asian neighbours, this will also likewise happen to China.

The most egregious geostrategic error made by the Ottomans in the 16th century was Suleiman's decision to annex Hungary. The conquest of Hungary forced the Ottomans to engage their European neighbours in an unending conflict lasting centuries. The annexation of a third of Hungary and the periodic attempts to also conquer Austria³² meant that every European power in Central and Eastern Europe viewed the Ottomans as a potential threat to themselves and

as the power most likely to dominate the region if left to act unimpeded. This fear then facilitated the formation of an anti-Ottoman alliance that eventually broke the power of the Ottomans forever.

The best course of action for Suleiman was to honour the peace treaty between the Ottomans and Hungary signed during the reign of Bayezid II (1481–512). By 1503 a new seven-year peace treaty, to be renewed in 1510 and 1511, was signed with Hungary, which secured official recognition of Ottoman suzerainty over Wallachea and Moldavia.³³ Poland, the other European power in the immediate vicinity of the Ottoman sphere of interest in the Balkans, at this stage, was too preoccupied with the incursions of the Crimean Tatars to be a direct threat to the Ottomans or even to enter into direct conflict with the Ottomans in the first half of the 16th century.³⁴ Therefore, the situation in the early years of Suleiman's reign was ideal for concentrating the empire's resources on conquests in the east (where I would argue henceforth the empire's future lay, not in Europe), since the northern, southern and western borders of the empire were quiet and nearly completely secure from foreign incursions. Hungary, up until then the principal European enemy of the Turks, was seriously weakened and decentralised following the death of Matthias Corvinus, and too weak to be a threat to the Ottomans.³⁵

The policy of the Ottoman Sultans until the reign of Bayezid II had primarily been directed towards expansion of territory in Europe and protracted wars in Europe (except during the reign of Bayezid I) overall took precedence over any territorial aggrandisement in Asia. Bayezid II in essence continued this policy and initiated, from a geostrategic point of view, a totally misguided war against Venice.³⁶ This war against a naval power that was essentially dependent upon the Ottoman Empire for its trade and economic viability and more importantly not in any way an existential threat to the Ottoman state, later turned Venice, a potential ally and shield against other European threats from the western Mediterranean, into an ally of the Habsburgs and inveterate enemy of the Sultans. Bayezid also encouraged the increase of Ottoman naval activity in the western Mediterranean,³⁷ which again was strategically pointless and a drain on valuable resources. In contrast, the sultan showed a complete lack of decisiveness when dealing with the heterodox Safavids to the east. Safavid inspired revolts such as the one under Şahkulu, ravaged Central and Southeastern Anatolia, feeding on nomadic Turkoman discontent.³⁸ The increasing Byzantinisation of the Ottomans and the severance of their connections to the Turkmen in Anatolia were in the long run hardly beneficial to the empire. It would destabilise the empire's eastern provinces and contribute substantially to the inability of the empire to expand further to the east.

This strategically erroneous preoccupation with difficult and indeed dangerous conquests in Europe was temporarily ended by the vigorous policies of Selim I (1512–20), who sagaciously decided to concentrate the resources of the empire on the much more feasible conquests in the east. Selim prudently continued the peace with Hungary (the only admirable geostrategic decision of note made by Bayezid II) and also did not reignite the conflict with Venice, thereby

removing pressures on the Ottoman Empire from the West.³⁹ This turning of the empire's attention to the east immediately reaped dividends and culminated in the impressive Ottoman victory at Chaldiran over the Safavids in 1514.⁴⁰ Due to the repeated failures of the Ottomans to follow up their victories in battle with a total conquest of Persia, it has been argued by some scholars that the conquest of Persia was an unachievable goal. However, Selim's inability in 1514 to immediately capitalise on his victory was actually due to a combination of factors. The difficulty of maintaining supplies and Safavid scorched earth tactics were certainly factors, but a far greater problem in 1514 was the dissension among the Janissaries and other elements of Selim's army that had been affected by Safavid propaganda.⁴¹

Selim quickly eliminated these elements and then turned his attention to the Mamluks who had defeated his father Bayezid in previous border wars. By conquering the Mamluks in 1516–17 Selim secured both his southern flank and also his supply routes for attacking Persia.⁴² He also gained a huge new source of revenue for his empire and realised the complete Ottoman monopoly of Venetian trade with the Orient, which had to pass through either Ottoman or former Mamluk territories. In essence, Selim was retracing the invasion route of Alexander nearly two millennia before him. Alexander had managed to conquer Persia, so why could not Selim or Suleiman? The argument that geography somehow made the conquest of Persia impossible is specious. As we shall see shortly, at least during the reign of Suleiman, the lack of progress in the east against Persia, was due more to lack of concentration of resources in the east and diversions of Ottoman attention to Europe and other western adventures that yielded little gains of strategic value.

Even before the conquest of the Mamluks by Selim Ottoman leaders actually knew instinctively where their core strategic interests lay. The Ottomans helped rebuild the Mamluk Red Sea fleet in order to end the Portuguese stranglehold on the Mamluk economy and by extension on the Ottoman economy.⁴³ The minor raids from Hungary and also naval activity in the Mediterranean during the last years of Selim, were of no great significance (recall the ephemeral Greek uprisings that threatened Antipater during Alexander's campaign against Persia).⁴⁴ Therefore, when Suleiman succeeded his father on the Ottoman throne he had all the advantages that could possibly have been given to any ruler embarking on a conquest of Persia. Suleiman had no contestants to the throne to fight against.⁴⁵ Unlike during his father's invasion of Iran in 1514, he possessed an obedient Janissary core purged of dissenters and heterodoxy by Selim. He had also inherited from his father unrivalled strategic advantage. Venice and Hungary had been neutralised, the Safavids were weakened by the death of the founding charismatic ruler Ismail and were now led by his lacklustre son Shah Tahmasp, and the Habsburgs were not yet a great threat or at their full potential. He also possessed a navy strong enough to safeguard his western domains and vast revenues and resources had been accumulated by Selim.

However, instead of utilising these immense advantages and resources to realise the conquest of Persia, which would have secured for the Ottoman Empire direct land routes to both India and China (then almost two thirds of the world's

economy and therefore markets to which the Ottomans had to have access to avoid economic stagnation), Suleiman diverted his attention to Europe and wasted the achievements of his predecessor.

During Suleiman's long reign there were simply too many campaigns in Hungary for little practical gain.⁴⁶ The removal of the buffer of Hungary also brought the Ottomans into direct contact with the more formidable Habsburgs, a truly bad move. Instead of a weak neighbour the Ottomans now had a world power at its northwestern border and also at the same time earned the hostility of other Christian states through this unnecessary act of aggression. True, Suleiman managed to detach France and temporarily Venice from the anti-Ottoman alliance, but replacing the relative peace under Selim with nearly continuous warfare in this theatre caused his efforts in the east to flounder.

Between 1526 and 1528 there were again Turkmen revolts in Anatolia.⁴⁷ More attention was needed in the east, but Suleiman mounted his second and third Hungarian expeditions instead.⁴⁸ In 1533, in the 13th year of his reign, he finally started paying attention to the east and this led to the annexation of Mesopotamia after a gruelling, poorly executed, costly campaign.⁴⁹ Suzerainty, not direct rule over Basra was then secured in 1539. The Safavids and the Portuguese were still a barrier to direct Ottoman trade with the east, but Suleiman, instead of continuing his conquests, left the east far too early.⁵⁰ He also waged a long naval war in the Mediterranean, which was glorious, but strategically useless.⁵¹ The more important eastern naval effort in the Indian Ocean and the war with Persia, were not given enough attention. Suleiman fragmented the Ottoman war effort by launching miscellaneous campaigns such as the one into Moldavia in 1538.⁵² These acts of aggression in Europe triggered a long, fruitless war with the Habsburgs on both land and sea and also isolated the Ottomans geopolitically. Suleiman should have used the Hungarians and Venetians as allies and buffers, not driven them into the arms of the Habsburgs.

In 1547, a long overdue second Iranian campaign was launched, but again only a couple of years were allocated to this effort and the campaign as a whole was not properly executed.⁵³ Suleiman was waging war in the wrong way, in Byzantine fashion, not in the Turco-Mongol or even Macedonian fashion. The Zagros Mountains are not an impenetrable barrier, the Macedonians and the Arabs had managed to cross them and make permanent conquests in Iran, so why could not Suleiman? The reason once again was that a major campaign needed to be launched in Europe in Transylvania in 1551. The conquest of Hungary, never completed, left the Ottomans in conflict with both the Habsburgs and Poland, who now allied against the Turks. Of course later to this mix was added Russia, an insurmountable obstacle to any success in this direction. The prolonged war with the Habsburgs yielded no tangible gains for the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁴

Direct Ottoman control over the key port of Basra, which controlled access to the Persian Gulf, was only secured in 1547. This lack of geostrategic vision on the part of Suleiman who had obviously under-appreciated the importance of building a stronger Ottoman naval presence in the Indian Ocean, contrasts strikingly with the prescience shown by his father Selim. In 1557 the Ottomans

secured control of forts commanding access to the Red Sea, thereby guaranteeing for the empire partial access to markets in the east. The Portuguese were not strong enough to apply a full blockade to the old trade routes. In 1554 Seydi Ali Reis and his Ottoman fleet based at Basra were, however, defeated by the Portuguese. Although only partial, the Indian Ocean blockade imposed by the Portuguese was already having some impact in the 16th century and leading to economic difficulties for the Ottomans.⁵⁵

Suleiman then mounted his last Iranian expedition, but this only resulted in the signing of the treaty of Amasya with Shah Tahmasp.⁵⁶ Internal political problems (a revolt in 1555) as well as the guerrilla tactics of the Safavids triggered the abandonment of the Iranian campaign.⁵⁷ The lack of a systematic, sustained and concentrated effort throughout Suleiman's reign to achieve a breakthrough in the east was also largely to blame. Suleiman's long reign ended with one last Hungarian campaign in 1566.⁵⁸

The best course of action to take for Suleiman – if he absolutely did have to make a demonstration of some sort to keep the Hungarians on their toes – was to limit his conquests to Belgrade (which was the key strategic area for checking any invasions into his Balkan provinces from Hungary) south of the Danube and then compromise with Hungary by signing a lasting peace treaty. This would mean abandoning any attempts to expand further into Europe north of the Danube (the natural geographical barrier protecting his Balkan provinces), thereby securing an independent Hungary as a useful buffer and even ally against Habsburg aggression. Furthermore, he should also have ceased to waste his valuable military and economic resources on financing the Mediterranean ventures of his naval fleets and engaging the Spaniards and the Venetians in a costly war for Mediterranean dominance.

Despite the illusion of naval supremacy that was briefly achieved under Suleiman, the Ottoman navy was never capable of overwhelming its European competitors in the seas adjacent to Europe because of the empire's constant need to divert critical resources for the purpose of maintaining a large land army to protect its borders. This need to maintain large field armies meant only limited resources could in the end be used for the navy, restricting its effectiveness. The weakness of the Ottoman navy was evident right from the beginning of its conception. Numerous defeats were sustained during the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror. Ottoman successes were always mainly on land and the strategic benefits to be accrued via the exploits of the corsairs in Ottoman service were also limited.⁵⁹ Despite all the efforts to build up naval strength in the Mediterranean the Ottoman efforts in this sea eventually came to grief in the great naval disaster at Lepanto. Despite the impressive size of the fleet and its successful forays into the Mediterranean prior to the battle, the Ottoman navy suffered a shattering defeat from which it never recovered fully.⁶⁰

If Suleiman had not wasted his naval resources in the Mediterranean and instead applied them more extensively elsewhere in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean where very small and insufficient Ottoman naval contingent were fighting a losing battle against the Portuguese, and if he had concentrated his land armies

and resources (away from the congested and militarily risky Central European theatre) against the more vulnerable target: Persia, which was going through a period of weakness under Shah Tahmasp, he would have achieved two significant gains. Firstly, he would have prevented the closure of Ottoman maritime trade routes with India and China by the Portuguese and by concentrating the bulk of Ottoman naval resources in the Indian Ocean theatre of operation prevented something similar being attempted later by the Dutch or British.

In the event of any possible naval defeat to either of the latter two European naval powers in the 17th century, the empire could then have simply fallen back on the dividends reaped by the second achievement that could have been realised by concentrating military resources in the east, the conquest of Persia and the securing of land routes to both India and China. If the Ottomans had concentrated their land forces against Persia in the 16th century this was an achievable goal and the conquest of Persia would have meant direct land access to Indian trade. Furthermore, it would have put the Ottomans in direct contact with the fragmented and weak Central Asian Turkish states (the Uzbek Khanate), the conquest or subjugation of which would have placed them in direct contact also with the Chinese Qing Empire.

In other words, even if the Europeans had cut off the maritime trade routes for the Ottomans, a more stable land route fortified and made secure by stable imperial rule in the Middle East and Central Asia (Ottoman), in East Turkestan (Qing China) and India and Afghanistan (Moghul India), might have resurrected the silk routes and prevented the economic stagnation that doomed the Ottoman state in later centuries. In addition, the 16th century was the only period in which the Ottomans could have effectively marshalled enough resources to realise these strategic goals. This was because the Tsardom of Russia which would later become the main enemy of the empire was still in the 16th century in its formative stages and not yet a mortal threat against which the empire would need to concentrate all available resources. If a peace treaty had been obtained from a reasonably intact and independent Hungary strong enough to check the Austrians on land in the 16th century, all this could have been possible and the Ottoman Empire might perhaps even have resisted the fate that befell it in the early 20th century.

The last chance to rectify the situation in the 16th century for the Ottomans was given during the reign of Murad III. Between 1578 and 1590 the Ottomans slowly conquered the Caucasus and Azerbaijan,⁶¹ but did not press home their advantage with rigour and finish off the Safavids. Huge booty was nonetheless secured and a combined attack on Iran with the Uzbeks in the east forced the young Safavid Shah Abbas to sue for terms.⁶² However, the bad geostrategy of Suleiman again affected the Ottomans here at the cusp of final victory over the Safavids. The great war with the Habsburgs (1593–606) forced the Ottomans to end their efforts in the east.⁶³ Yet the conquest of Azerbaijan, western Iran and the Caucasus (and the achievement of forging an alliance with the Uzbeks to simultaneously attack the Safavids in 1588) showed that with sustained effort and proper leadership the destruction of the Safavid Empire during the reign of Suleiman would have been a possibility.

From 1603 onwards, however, the empire lost all of its previous gains in Persia due to the spreading of its military resources on two fronts,⁶⁴ the legacy of Suleiman's poor geopolitical insight and lack of geostrategic vision. That legacy would in the end lead to the disaster at Vienna in 1683, the war of the holy league against the Ottomans (1683–99),⁶⁵ and the humiliating peace of Karlowitz. The misguided geostrategy of Suleiman and the later Ottomans created a situation where a coalition of Russia, Austria, Poland and Venice was formed against the Ottoman, which the Turks could not manage to defeat under any circumstances. This precipitated the empire's gradual territorial reduction and ultimately decline.

If Hungary had not been destroyed by Suleiman and left as a buffer, there would have been no Habsburg Empire in Central Europe to trouble the Ottomans. Direct conflict with Poland could have been avoided and any war with them could have been waged via proxy, the Crimean Tatars. This would have left the Ottomans with just one enemy to concentrate on in the 17th and 18th centuries, Russia, which only became a major problem for them in the late 17th century. By then, if the Ottomans had conquered Persia, they would have possessed enough resources and strategic depth to handle the Russian problem, just as the Ilkhans of Persia had earlier managed the Golden Horde. No multiple alliances would have formed against the empire and direct access to China and India would have nullified any European naval blockade, even if there was one. The possible Turkification of northern Persia (brought about by a concentration of Ottoman attention in those areas) may have conceivably resulted in a continuous land connection of ethnic Turks from the Aegean to the borders of China, possibly facilitating the formation of a larger ethnically Turkic superstate in western Asia, guaranteeing Turkey's place as a great power, rather than just a middling sort of power it is today and will likely be in the future. This would of course have necessitated the moving of the imperial centre away from Constantinople, which is in any case too vulnerable to naval invasion, and focusing more on Anatolia and Azerbaijan, i.e. becoming a more Turkic empire with a centre of gravity in the east.

The final attempt at expansion into Persia was put into effect too late by the Ottomans in the 18th century. By then the Russians and the Austrians were too much of a threat for the Ottomans to concentrate all or even most of their resources on the conquest of Persia. The bad luck of facing the last great Inner Asian conqueror, Nader Shah, also helped frustrate the one last effort of the empire to rejuvenate itself.

Thus, as can be seen from the examples of both the Persian Sassanian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, bad geostrategic choices doomed both powers from ever fully achieving their latent hegemonic potential. The Persians should have concentrated their attention on the east and so too should have the Ottomans. They should both have avoided confrontation with powers (Roman and European) that had the potential to destroy them or severely weaken them and concentrated their aggression on weaker targets to build up their overall strength. China should act accordingly in light of these geopolitical lessons, if it wishes to become a real long-lasting hegemonic power. It should avoid clashing with the US in East Asia, maintain a navy just strong enough to prevent a closure of trade routes, while focusing its attention on the weak target, Central Asia with its abundant resources.

However, we then immediately encounter the question of Russia. Will they ever countenance Chinese domination of what they regard to be their own strategic backyard? This is where the Yuan Mongol precedent is important for China. What China should aim for is a loose hegemonic alliance, which allows China to dominate Central Asia economically (and to a much lesser degree politically), while guaranteeing the freedom of Central Asian States to freely associate also with Russia and Iran (as the Chagatai were able to do with the Ilkhanate and the Golden Horde). This will make the deal more palatable to Russia and by giving Russia and Iran the means/ active support to pursue their ambitions in other regions, China will be able to elicit the recognition by these powers of Chinese hegemonic leadership against the powers that opposes these ambitions (namely the US, the Saudis and Israel). Via this geostrategy China can dominate Mackinder's so-called core area and form a Eurasian continental alliance that can challenge America's claim to global hegemony without coming to direct blows with the US in a land war or naval war in east Asia or elsewhere. A deceptively passive posture towards other East Asian states will also weaken the resolve among these states to actively join an anti-Chinese coalition. However, in order to achieve these goals China will have to revise its current geostrategic approach and scale back or abandon the dream of creating the so-called 'Maritime Silk Road' (MSR). That route, as argued above, is too vulnerable to defend and will only encourage maritime states in the region to coalesce behind the US against what they will most likely view as Chinese imperial aggression and expansionism.

4.2 The geostrategic options for the US

The best geostrategic choice for China is thus clear. How should the US then respond to this Chinese challenge? As argued throughout, the best option for the US is to retrench in areas of non-vital interest and to concentrate all available resources in containing China. What is needed is a complete encirclement of China which disallows even the option outlined above (China's expansion into Central Asia). To achieve this the US should implement the following policies:

- 1) Withdraw most military resources from the Middle East and Europe with the exception of a sustained, significant presence in Poland
- 2) Concentrate all other available military assets and resources in East Asia
- 3) Cooperate with Russia for the time being.

Why should the US withdraw from Europe and the Middle East? Because these regions, especially the Middle East, are no longer areas of vital interest for the United States. The only coveted asset the Middle East had and which the US needed was oil. Now that the US has achieved energy sufficiency for the rest of the century via the shale gas revolution, for the time being the region is largely useless to the US and a mere drain on resources. But what about the defence of Israel, one might ask? Israel is an important ally of the US, that is true, and it

will be necessary to support this key ally financially for the foreseeable future so that it can continue to function as America's proxy in the region. However, Israel already has the means to defeat militarily any neighbouring country intent on threatening its sovereignty and thus it is unnecessary to continue to maintain a military presence (or intervene directly) in the Middle East just to protect Israel.

The third policy recommendation listed above will furthermore nullify the only credible threat to Israel (Iran's nuclear programme), as will be demonstrated below. Israel has until now effectively utilised the US to carry out its own geostrategic objectives while conserving its own resources. The excellent abilities of Israeli geostrategists in deftly furthering their own national interests should be recognised. However, the age of direct US interventions in the Middle East is now drawing to a close or rather should end as soon as possible. Indeed, if the US desires to remain as the global hegemonic power, then it can no longer afford to fight Israel's wars for it.

The same applies to Europe. The only power that threatens America's allies in this region is Russia. Yet, Russia with an economy the size of South Korea's, is not powerful enough to realistically contemplate dominating the region, let alone conquering the EU. The only hypothetical danger to US hegemony that could conceivably arise from Europe is the remote possibility of Russia forming an alliance with Germany, which would lead to the merging of Russian military power with Germany's economic power. There we have a combination that could aim for global power, which of course the US must not allow. Herein lies the rationale for keeping a residual military presence in Poland. Poland is the most strategically vital area of Europe, situated as it is between the German and Russian spheres of influence. Placing a significant military force there would geographically block any direct connections being formed between Germany and Russia and if there are attempts at rapprochement between the two powers, America with its residual presence in Europe (Poland) can swiftly intervene to sabotage any such plans. Due to its historic animosity to both Germany and Russia, Poland is a natural and most reliable partner to the US, tailor-made for this role.

Thus, the US should give Poland greater attention, scale up the military presence there and prevent its takeover by either Russia or Germany. A retreat from Poland would trigger a wave of defections from among EU countries formally in the US sphere of influence. In such a situation a Germany-Russia merger could become a reality. The US must, therefore, deny Germany the incentive to form such as alliance, while at the same time setting a clear limit to Russian expansion. A more powerful Poland as America's most loyal partner in the region would thus serve US interests perfectly, while allowing the US to scale down commitments to other European nations further to the west.

Would this lead to America's loss of prestige in the eyes of European and Middle Eastern allies? Hardly. As argued in the introduction, by concentrating on core interests, the US can actually avoid suffering any diminution in prestige, even whilst scaling down actual commitments. By securely holding on to Poland, the US can demonstrate a clear will to defend its core interests and allay the fears of key allies in Europe (UK, France and Germany). By continuing to finance Israel,

the US will also continue to have a base of operations in the Middle East and what the Arab states think of the US is in reality of no grave concern to America. None of them are important enough to worry about geopolitically.

Retrenchment in Europe and the Middle East would in turn free up much needed resources that can then be concentrated in East Asia. Why is this needed? Because any sign of weakness in East Asia will herald the end of US hegemony across the globe and trigger a power transition in favour of China. The contest in East Asia is a litmus test that will determine who will dominate the world in the 21st century. Critical to US success in this region is the securing of Japan as a dependable ally/client state. One may ask, isn't Japan already a committed supporter of the US? Only while it is assured of continued and active US intervention in the region. The moment there is any indication of a US withdrawal from anywhere in the region to supplicate China, Japan will likely rearm (i.e. turn into a nuclear weapons state) and the US will then lose control over it. Once that happens, there is no telling what may occur. We may even posit this scenario of China reaching out to Japan and proposing a diarchy over East Asia. Impossible? Once Japan attains the ability to defend itself by itself, such an arrangement is not out of the question and the US will face an even bigger problem than the hypothetical Germany-Russia alliance discussed above. A Sino-Japanese pact (a greater East Asia) would signal the immediate end of US hegemony.

What could then trigger such an outcome? The answer is a US defeat in or withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula. Control over the Korean Peninsula is the key to preventing Japan from going nuclear.⁶⁶ Geopolitically, Korea is the dagger that is pointed at both the Japanese archipelago and China. Thus, an American military presence on the peninsula is essential to guaranteeing Japan's continued good behaviour vis-à-vis the US and is the key to the encirclement strategy regarding China. China also understands this instinctively and is trying to push the US out of the peninsula via its proxy, North Korea. The US should thus continue to apply maximum pressure on North Korea (its disarmament or at the very least effective containment can easily be achieved by again placing US nuclear weapons in South Korea, which would force the Chinese to rein in their clients in Pyongyang).

More dangerous to long-term US interests in the region than the poverty-stricken mess that is North Korea, is however actually the recent seizure of power by pro-Chinese factions in South Korea. The political forces supporting the current Moon Jae-in government (the leftist, pro-North Korea/ pro-China segment of the South Korean ruling establishment) successfully carried out a civilian 'coup d'état' of sorts in 2017 (likely with North Korean and Chinese backing or encouragement) that overthrew the relatively pro-American, conservative government of Park Geun-hye (ironically using similar methods to the US-backed uprising that led to the overthrow of the pro-Russian government in the Ukraine earlier). Leaving this pro-Chinese regime in power in South Korea will adversely affect US strategy vis-à-vis China. It is in America's best interests, therefore, to take swift action to empower/mobilise pro-American forces in South Korea and undermine the pro-Chinese factions in the country. Fortunately for the US, America

is in a stronger position in Korea than Russia was in the Ukraine. It has an army already stationed in Korea. Geostrategic necessity demands a concerted effort to weaken the Moon regime's grip on power, if that is this regime continues to damage US interests in the region by dragging South Korea away from the US sphere of influence and into China's orbit.

Once Korea and Japan are secured, the US should then strengthen its already cordial relations with Vietnam, Australia and India. The contest with China is then half-won. This coalition is too formidable already for China to effectively handle. But to deliver the knockout blow on China as a geopolitical competitor one more piece is needed to complete the encirclement puzzle around China: Russia. If Russia can be persuaded to abandon its ties with China and side with the US (recall how in the analogy used earlier the Eastern Romans persuaded the Turks to abandon their ties with Sassanian Persia and thereby achieved the effective encirclement of Persia), then China is fully surrounded by an American-led coalition with no escape routes. When this is achieved US hegemony will be secure for another century.

The above-mentioned retrenchment from Europe and the Middle East is what will facilitate this Russian change of heart. The US, by withdrawing from Russia's backyard and conceding to Russia the Kremlin's domination of former Soviet bloc nations (as horrible as that sounds), will be able to offer Putin a better deal than China can offer. After all, the only best option China has is to dominate Central Asia, where its interests will inevitably collide with Russia's, even if a compromise can be worked out along the lines suggested earlier. An acknowledgement of Russian rights in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and an agreement of non-interference in the Russian sphere of influence will bring Russia over to the US side, as Russia with its extensive, common borders with China is actually a natural geopolitical enemy of China and fears China's increasing influence over its far-eastern territories. With Russia on board the US can also resolve another geopolitical conundrum, the threat of Iran going nuclear. Via the concessions discussed above Russia can also be persuaded to assist in containing Iran. Iran, deprived of Russian backing, will then be left with no choice but to comply and abandon any nuclear ambitions (which would in turn remove for Israel any possible danger of an Iranian nuclear attack).

Coming to an agreement with Putin? That may sound like anathema to many and what is being suggested here is certainly not an endorsement of the Putin regime or its authoritarian tendencies. The author of this book, as a descendent of North Korean democracy activists, who fled from Soviet Russian oppression before the Korean War as refugees, and whose family members were murdered and tortured by the Russian KGB, does not suggest this geostrategic option lightly or with any personal satisfaction. Geostrategy, however, cannot and should not be guided/determined by personal sentiments, political preference or even strictly moral considerations. Was it morally justifiable to ally with Stalin, a ruthless dictator who had slain tens of millions of people, during the Second World War in order to dethrone an equally repulsive dictator, Hitler, in Europe? Any alliance with Stalin was neither politically nor morally justifiable. Yet, it was, unfortunately

for those who suffered under Soviet rule, a sensible geostrategic decision for the US and its Allies, because back then Nazi Germany was perceived as a greater evil and threat than Soviet Russia.

After the Nazis were defeated the US then cooperated with another ruthless dictator, Mao Zedong, in order to counter the more formidable geopolitical threat (the USSR). Were Nixon and Kissinger wrong to pursue this *détente* with Mao? Morally speaking yes, but despite it being morally and politically inexcusable, again this was a sensible geostrategic move. The same logic applies to the current situation. Which nation is currently the greater threat to US hegemony and is a more powerful competitor? Russia or China? There we have the answer. As much as we would always like to find a morally correct and politically preferable solution, unfortunately in the theatre of international politics such solutions are rare and actors engaged in geostrategic decision making are more often than not forced to choose the least worst option. Most of the options suggested in this volume are, the author would readily agree, perhaps such least worst options rather than the optimal options (which are unavailable in my opinion). These options, however, in the estimations of the author (in the context of comparisons with cited historical precedents and exempla) seem to be the most sensible ways of avoiding a catastrophic hegemonic war (like the Byzantine-Sassanian War of the 7th century AD which destroyed the power of both victor and defeated alike), the consequences of which would be much worse than any discomfort we may feel from the suggestions made above. The author of this volume sincerely hopes that others may come up with better geostrategic scenarios. An agreement with Russia, however, is, it seems, a geopolitical necessity for the US, since it will bring with it tangible geostrategic advantages.

Once China is no longer a viable contender and if Russia again becomes a credible threat to US hegemony, then the US can simply reapply the age-old policy of divide and rule, that is playing off the various Eurasian powers against each other (this time linking up with China and other Eurasian middle powers to balance Russia), while posing as the arbiter of their disputes. It is doubtful that Russia with its myriad of internal problems will pose a meaningful threat to US hegemony in the future. The real problem for America is China, and the US, for now, has some critical advantages over its rival. Both militarily and economically the US is still far ahead of China. Unlike the Han dynasty, the Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire, all of which faced a militarily more powerful challenger (the Huns), the US faces a much weaker opponent which it does not even have to appease or buy off (as the three empires did in the case of the Huns). The US needs a more aggressive East Asian policy and this will guarantee the stable maintenance of US hegemony for the foreseeable future.

But then would not China react violently to this strategy and lash out to break the encirclement? The Chinese leadership are not suicidal or stupid enough to fight a war they will definitely end up losing. A war may break out if the opposite course of action is taken, that is if America hesitates and allows China to grow any further militarily or geopolitically. Then, China may indeed be encouraged to risk an open confrontation with the US. But if even Russia sides with the US? The

game is then truly over for the challenger and China will be forced to acquiesce like Japan after 1945, becoming effectively another client state of the US.

Thus, to conclude, it is possible to forecast the lasting continuation of US hegemony in the 21st century, bar any unexpected and misguided geostrategic decisions by US policymakers (which is not impossible and self-inflicted reverses/losses on the part of the US, such as another involvement in a lengthy, useless war in the Middle East, is the best China can hope for in any future showdown with the US over global hegemony, since the geopolitical advantage currently lies firmly with the US). One possibility is that the cooperation with Russia, suggested above, may be politically impossible for the current or the following US administrations, despite its obvious geostrategic benefits for the US. This would be a rare opportunity for China to exploit. What is clear is that the 21st century will indeed be an 'Asian Century', but an Asian Century with the US likely at the top of the Asian pecking order. China faces a truly uphill battle, if it aspires to the status of global hegemon. The geopolitical reality of Eurasia and the Pacific places China at a serious disadvantage and greatly favours the US, for now.

Notes

- 1 For instance, the wholesale destruction and looting of the Americas by the Spaniards and the colonisation and ransacking of large portions of Africa and South Asia by the British.
- 2 Spain was hardly the military equal of the Ottoman Empire in any capacity other than in naval warfare, even after swallowing up most of the Americas, while the British were matched or surpassed by Germany, France and Russia on land and seriously challenged even at sea.
- 3 Grygiel (2006), 90–1.
- 4 Rossabi (1994), 442–5.
- 5 Rossabi (1994), 431.
- 6 See Rossabi (1994), 474, 482, 484–7.
- 7 Hsiao (1994), 501.
- 8 Hsiao (1994), 501–4.
- 9 Hsiao (1994), 550–1.
- 10 Rossabi (1994), 442–5.
- 11 For fiscal mismanagement and corruption within the Yuan Empire see Hsiao (1994), 498–501, 509, 522–3. By the 1330s the Yuan government had a budget deficit of 2,390,000 *ting* (p. 552).
- 12 Hsiao (1994), 551. There were 65 revolts of ethnic minorities during the reign of Yesün Temür and 21 revolts during the reign of Tugh Temür. Modern China itself with its many minorities who feel repressed (Tibetans and Uyghurs in particular) must also take note.
- 13 Dardess (1994), 585–6.
- 14 Hsiao (1994), 558.
- 15 Grygiel (2006), 124.
- 16 Rossabi (1994), 474, 482, 484, 487.
- 17 Grygiel (2006), 125–9. For Ming naval activity during the reign of the Yongle emperor see Chan (1988), 232–6, 302–3.
- 18 Grygiel (2006), 130.
- 19 Rossabi (1998), 233–4. See also pp. 235–7 for the rise of Dayan Khan and Altan Khan in the late 15th century and the mid-16th century respectively. Altan Khan's

- armies came within sight of Beijing in 1550 and the Mongol threat continued unabated until 1571.
- 20 See Chan (1988), 275–6, 298, who discusses the prohibitive costs of Yongle overseas expeditions. Even without these naval expeditions imperial finances were already stretched to a breaking point due to high administrative and military expenditures. Whether these expensive naval ventures could have been sustained in the post-1449 period is doubtful, especially since the expeditions were more or less the vanity projects of the emperor which did not bring any immediate tangible gains for the empire.
 - 21 See Wang (1998), 320–1. The Ming court lost interest in the south after 1435 AD (p. 302).
 - 22 Even the conquest of this much smaller Vietnam ended in a costly failure for the Ming. See Chan (1988), 229–31. Incidentally, even the Mongols failed to conquer Vietnam. See Rossabi (1994), 485.
 - 23 For Sinophilia and *sadaejueui* (serve the great, i.e. China) sentiment in Korea during the Chosun dynasty see Kim Haboush (1988), 21–8, and Larsen (2008), 29–35.
 - 24 Grygiel (2006), 90–1.
 - 25 Grygiel (2006), 121.
 - 26 Grygiel (2006), 114.
 - 27 Stripling (1977), 92; Clot (1989), 194–5, 198.
 - 28 Weinstein (1999), 96–7, 100.
 - 29 Grygiel (2006), 115. Shaw (1976), 107; Clot (1989), 197; Stripling (1977), 102–7.
 - 30 Grygiel (2006), 116.
 - 31 Grygiel (2006), 120.
 - 32 Fleet (2012), 32–4.
 - 33 Fleet (2012), 30.
 - 34 Shaw (1976), 72–3.
 - 35 Shaw (1976), 74.
 - 36 Fleet (2012), 29–30.
 - 37 Shaw (1976), 75–6.
 - 38 Shaw (1976), 78; Fleet (2012), 30; Boyar (2012), 104.
 - 39 Shaw (1976), 80.
 - 40 Fleet (2012), 31; Boyar (2012), 106–10.
 - 41 Shaw (1976), 81–3.
 - 42 Shaw (1976), 83–5; Fleet (2012), 31–2; Boyar (2012), 111–13.
 - 43 Fleet (2012), 29.
 - 44 Shaw (1976), 86.
 - 45 Shaw (1976), 87.
 - 46 Shaw (1976), 91 ff; Fleet (2012), 32 ff.
 - 47 Fleet (2012), 34–5.
 - 48 Shaw (1976), 92–4.
 - 49 Boyar (2012), 118–21.
 - 50 Shaw (1976), 95–6.
 - 51 Fleet (2012), 35–6.
 - 52 Shaw (1976), 96–100.
 - 53 Shaw (1976), 104–5; Boyar (2012), 123–5.
 - 54 Shaw (1976), 105–6.
 - 55 Shaw (1976), 107.
 - 56 Fleet (2012), 38; Boyar (2012), 126–32.
 - 57 Shaw (1976), 108–9.
 - 58 Shaw (1976), 110–11.
 - 59 Grygiel (2006), 107–9.
 - 60 Fleet (2012), 40; Grygiel (2006), 111; Braudel (1973), 1088; Beeching (1982), 228; Canosa (2000), 277.
 - 61 Fleet (2012), 41–2; Boyar (2012), 135–9.

62 Shaw (1976), 180–3.

63 Shaw (1976), 184–5.

64 Shaw (1976), 188–9.

65 Shaw (1976) 214–25.

66 See the argument of Brzezinski (1997), 169, 171, 190–1. See also the analysis in Horesh, Kim and Mauch (2015), 123–9.

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Index

- Achaemenids 69–70, 82n121, 82n124
Aetius 48, 49, 51, 52–53, 77n40
Akatziri 29–30, 31
Alamanni 23, 44
Alans 24, 26, 32, 38n57, 38n61, 44, 46, 47,
48, 49, 52, 53, 57, 78n50
Alaric 46, 47, 77n40
Alexander 20, 70, 96
Ammianus Marcellinus 25, 40n105
Anagai 38n59, 62
Anastasius 57
Arsacids 19, 71–72, 73–74, 84n165
Asia-Pacific 2, 16
Aspar 49, 57, 78n50
Attila 26, 27, 28–30, 31, 32, 38n62, 39n83,
39n84, 39n88, 48, 49–54, 56, 57, 73,
76n3, 78n46, 78n47
Avars 16, 39n86, 39n95, 61, 62, 63–64,
65, 80n83, 80n84, 80n85, 81n86, 81n90,
81n91, 81n92, 81n94, 81n95
- Bagaudae 48, 52, 78n40
Bayan 63, 80n84
Bayezid II 95
Berik 30, 31
Bleda 27, 28, 29, 30, 39n84, 39n85, 49, 52
British Empire 86
Brzezinski, Zbigniew 77n36, 108n66
Bulgars 30, 31, 39n86, 39n88, 45, 63,
81n86, 81n93, 81n95, 81n98
Burgundians 48, 77n40
- challenger (geopolitical) 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,
13–14, 16, 22, 32, 105, 106
Central Asia 19–20, 21, 24, 25, 26, 32,
33–34, 36n37, 36n39, 37n44, 54, 63,
66, 68, 72, 76, 80n83, 81n86, 81n92,
83n136, 83n151, 87, 88–89, 93, 99,
100–101, 104
- Chagatai Khanate 87, 88, 89, 101
China (PRC) 1–2, 6–7, 10, 11, 15–16, 55,
57, 59, 60, 63, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 71–74,
75, 76, 84n165, 85, 86–88, 89–90, 91–93,
94, 100–101, 103–104, 105–106, 106n12
Chinese Communists 60, 71, 72–75,
84n165, 84n166, 89, 90, 94
Chinggis Khan 88
Chionites 20, 32, 33, 40n103
- Deguignes 19
Dengizich 30, 39n97, 57
Dingling 20, 40n112, 42, 43
Donghu 20, 80n85
- East Asia 1, 11, 15, 43, 55, 59, 60, 65–66,
75, 79n64, 81n86, 87, 90, 94, 100–101,
103, 105
Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine
Empire) 16, 23, 45, 47, 49, 50, 51, 53,
54–56, 57, 59, 65, 66, 68, 75, 81n94
Edeco 29, 30, 53, 56
Ellac 30–31
Emperor Wu 41–42
Ernak 30, 39n88, 39n93, 63
Eurasia 2, 15–16, 17n3, 19, 20–21, 23, 24,
25, 26, 47, 55, 57–58, 59, 60, 61, 63,
64, 65, 69, 72, 79n68, 80n85, 85–86,
87–90, 101, 105, 106
- Franks 23, 45, 46, 48, 52, 63
- Gaozu 22, 42
geopolitics 1–2, 11, 13, 15–16, 17n2, 19,
20, 23, 25, 27, 32–33, 34, 35n28, 36n35,
42–43, 47, 51, 54–55, 59, 61, 65, 66,
67–68, 72, 75, 76n3, 77n36, 77n38,
78n62, 80n83, 82n116, 85, 87, 88–89,
91, 92–94, 97, 100, 103, 104, 105–106

- geostrategy 2, 13, 15–16, 17n2, 42, 44, 45,
51, 54, 55, 58–59, 61, 62, 63–64, 65,
68, 79n72, 82n108, 82n116, 85, 90, 92,
93–94, 95, 97, 99–102, 104–105, 106
- Gepids 30, 39n85, 63
- Germany 11, 16, 35n28, 55–56, 71, 86,
102–103, 105, 106n2
- Gibbon, Edward 23, 54, 77n35
- Gilpin, Robert 7, 14
- Golden, Peter B. 39n88, 81n98
- Golden Horde 87, 100, 101
- Goldstein, Joshua S. 3
- Goths 23, 24, 26, 28, 31, 36n34, 38n70,
38n77, 39n97, 44, 45, 46–47, 48, 49–50,
51–52, 57, 58, 77n29, 78n40, 78n50
- Great Britain 7, 8, 54, 85–86
- Gunchen Chanyu 22, 41
- Grygiel, Jakub J. 2, 17n2, 87, 90–91, 92,
93–94
- Habsburgs 85, 87, 92, 94, 95, 96–97, 98,
99, 100
- Han (dynasty/empire) 2, 4, 19–20, 22,
40n112, 41–43, 44, 105
- Heather, Peter 35n21, 35n22, 36n34
- hegemon 3–7, 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 75, 85, 86,
88, 106
- hegemony 1, 3–4, 7, 8–9, 10, 19, 22, 25,
27, 32, 34, 37n57, 38n67, 39n85, 42,
43, 44, 45, 58, 59, 60, 64, 65–66, 67,
69, 75, 79n68, 86, 87, 88–89, 101, 102,
103, 104, 105, 106
- Herodotus 25–26, 37n42, 70
- Hensel, Paul R. 11
- Hephthalites 28, 33, 34, 61, 63, 66–68,
72–73, 75–76, 80n85, 83n156,
83n160, 93
- Heqin* 22, 35n16, 41–42, 49
- Heraclius 64–65, 82n108
- Honorius 46, 77n40
- Howard-Johnston, James 36n33, 82n101,
82n108, 82n110, 82n116, 82n117
- Huhanye 43
- Hunas 20
- Huns 2, 4, 16, 19–21, 23, 24–34, 35n1,
35n28, 36n34, 36n36, 36n37, 36n39,
37n44, 37n47, 37n57, 38n59, 38n61,
38n62, 38n67, 38n70, 38n77, 39n79,
39n85, 39n89, 39n93, 39n95, 39n97,
40n103, 40n112, 40n114, 40n115,
43–58, 61, 63, 65, 66–69, 72–74, 75,
76n3, 77n34, 77n38, 77n40, 78n62,
79n79, 80n84, 80n85, 81n92, 82n116,
83n160, 93, 94, 105
- Ichise 41
- Ikenberry, G. John 4, 10
- Ilkhanate 101
- Inner Asia 1, 16, 19–21, 31, 32, 33, 34, 45,
51, 61, 68, 69–70, 71, 72, 75, 79n72,
79n79, 81n85, 82n121, 82n126, 83n130,
84n166, 91, 100
- Iran 1–2, 3, 4, 16, 28, 32–33, 34, 54, 63,
66, 69, 70, 73–74, 85, 87, 88, 89, 96,
97–98, 99, 101, 102, 104
- Israel 101–102, 104
- Japan 11, 16, 63, 74, 86, 87, 88–89, 90, 91,
103, 104, 106
- Jervis, Robert 6
- John Malalas 39n85, 52
- Jordanes 51, 77n29
- Justin II 61, 62, 64, 79n72, 80n83
- Justinian 57, 58–59, 61, 62–63, 78n62, 80n83
- Kagan, Robert 14
- Kaplan, Robert 14, 77n36
- Karaton 48
- Kavad 67–68, 73
- Kayanian 74, 83n163, 83n164, 84n166
- Keohane, Robert O. 3
- Khaidu 88–89
- Khosrau I 59
- Khosrau II 62, 64
- Khubilai 87–89
- Kidarites 33, 66–67, 73
- Kindleberger, Charles 3
- Kissinger, Henry 105
- Korea 91, 103–104, 107n23
- Krasner, Stephen 8
- Kupchan, Charles A. 4
- Kushans 34, 72, 83n151
- La Vaissière, Étienne de 40n111, 80n85,
83n156
- Levy, Jack 6
- liberal 4, 8–9, 10, 14
- MacDonald, Paul 14–15
- Mackinder, Halford 2, 101
- Mahan, Alfred T. 85
- Manchus 70–71, 75, 91
- Maniakh 61
- Marcellinus Comes 38n74, 50, 77n25
- Marcian 51, 78n50
- Matthews, John 23
- Maurice 62–63, 64, 80n83, 81n92
- Mearsheimer, John 3, 6, 11, 15
- Menander 38n59, 62, 80n84

- Middle East 16, 55, 57–58, 59, 60, 64–65, 76, 77n37, 82n109, 82n121, 87, 93, 99, 101–103, 104, 106
- Ming (empire/dynasty) 2, 70, 76, 85, 87, 90–92, 106n17, 107n21, 107n22
- Modelski, George 3
- Modu Chanyu 20, 22, 42
- Mongols 2, 70–71, 75, 76, 87, 88–90, 91, 97, 101, 107n19, 107n22
- Morgenthau, Hans 7
- Muhan 61
- Nanaivande 19
- neorealism 5, 7
- Nye, Joseph 3, 9
- Octar/Oktar 30, 39n83, 39n84, 48
- Odoacer 53, 77n34
- Olympiodorus 29, 38n73, 48, 77n14
- Onegesius 29, 30, 31, 38n70
- Onogurs 63, 81n98
- Organski, Abramo F.K. 6–7
- Ostrogoths 32, 58, 78n62
- Ottomans 2, 85, 87, 92–100, 106n2
- Parent, Joseph 14–15
- Parthians 19, 68, 69, 70–71, 72, 74, 75, 82n126, 83n131, 83n135
- Peroz 66–67, 73
- Pivot to Asia 59
- Plutarch 71, 83n135, 83n137
- Poland 16, 87, 93, 94, 95, 97, 100, 101, 102
- power transition 1, 2, 4–8, 9–10, 11, 103
- Priscus 28–29, 30, 38n61, 38n62, 38n64, 38n66, 38n68, 38n71, 38n75, 39n78, 39n85, 39n87, 39n89, 39n92, 39n93, 39n95, 39n97, 50, 51–52, 56–57, 77n18, 77n19, 77n26, 77n29, 77n30, 77n31, 78n41, 78n47, 81n85
- Procopius 34, 40n116, 67, 73, 82n114, 83n160, 83n162
- Prosper 53, 77n15, 77n33, 77n40
- Qin (dynasty/empire) 19, 20, 22
- Qing (dynasty/empire) 70, 71, 72, 84n166, 85, 99
- realist/realism 3, 4–5, 6–7, 9, 10, 11, 14
- retrenchment 13–14, 15, 22, 41, 103, 104
- Rosecrance, Richard 11
- Rossabi, Morris 88
- Rouran 27–28, 29–30, 32, 33, 37n50, 37n53, 37n56, 39n86, 39n95, 61, 63, 66, 68, 75, 80n79, 80n85
- Ruga 29, 30, 32, 48, 49
- Russia 9, 16, 35n28, 37n50, 38n62, 44, 63, 65, 72, 86, 87, 88, 89, 93, 94, 97, 99, 100, 101–102, 103–106, 106n2
- Safavids 85, 93, 95–97, 98, 99
- Saka 69, 70–71, 83n131
- Sassanian (Persia) 2, 3, 16, 17, 20, 28, 32, 34, 47, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 66–68, 69, 70, 71–72, 73–75, 77n37, 79n63, 79n72, 79n75, 82n108, 82n116, 82n117, 83n149, 83n163, 84n166, 93, 100, 104, 105
- Sciri 30, 44, 54
- Scythians 25–26, 31, 37n42, 56, 69, 70, 82n121, 83n131
- Selim I 95–97
- Shapur I 72
- Shapur II 32–33
- Silziboulos 61–62
- Sima Qian 41
- Snidal, Duncan 9
- Spain (empire) 85, 92, 106n2
- Stilicho 46, 47, 48
- Strange, Susan 9
- Suebi 44, 45, 46
- Suleiman 94–95, 96–98, 99–100
- Sunzi 2
- Surena 70–71
- Tahmasp 96, 98, 99
- Tardu 62
- Temur 87, 88–89, 106n12
- territorial disputes 11–12
- Theodosius II 48, 49, 50, 77n40
- Theophanes 40n115, 49, 61, 77n21, 77n23, 82n114
- Thompson, Edward A. 30–31, 38n69, 44, 56
- Tiberius 61, 62
- Tung Yabghu 64
- Turks 28, 37n50, 37n56, 61–62, 63, 64–65, 68, 75, 79n72, 79n75, 80n79, 80n83, 82n108, 95, 97, 100, 104
- Turxath 62
- Uldin 28, 29, 31, 45–46, 47–48
- US (United States) 1, 2, 4, 7, 8–9, 13, 14, 15–16, 54–56, 57, 58–59, 60, 63, 65–66, 69, 72, 73, 75, 76, 77n36, 77n38, 85, 86–87, 90, 91–92, 100–106
- USSR (Soviet Union) 9, 16, 25, 26, 35n28, 36n35, 54–55, 56, 57, 72–73, 75, 77n38, 86, 93, 105
- Uzbeks 93, 99
- Valentinian III 51–52, 53
- Van Evera, Stephen 12

- Vandals 46–47, 49, 52, 58–59, 78n50,
 78n55, 78n62
 Visigoths 46–47, 48, 51, 52, 53, 58, 77n40

 Wallerstein, Immanuel 4
 Walt, Stephen 13
 Wayman, Frank W. 5
Weilüe 2, 33, 40n112
Wei Shu 19, 33
 Wendi 22
 Western Roman Empire 25, 36n32, 47, 49,
 51, 52–54, 55
 White Huns 20, 33–34, 63, 66, 67–68,
 72–73, 75, 80n85
 Wuhuan 42, 43, 80n85
 Wusun 37n57, 40n112, 42

 Xianbei 43, 80n85
 Xiongnu 2, 16, 19–23, 26–28, 29–32, 33–
 34, 35n1, 35n4, 35n13, 36n39, 37n53,
 37n57, 39n91, 39n93, 39n95, 41–43, 45,
 47, 49, 50, 54, 70, 79n79, 80n85

 Yazdegerd II 66
 Yongle 90, 91, 106n17, 107n20
 Yuan (empire/dynasty) 2, 76, 85, 87–90,
 101, 106n11
 Yuezhi 20, 37n57, 83n129

 Zemarkhos 61–62
 Zhizhi 42–43
 Zhu Fahu 19
 Zosimus 44, 76n5, 77n11



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